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Stabilizing a Crisis and the Mürzsteg Agreement of 1903: International Efforts to Bring Peace to Macedonia

„Though I am in the service of the Ottomans for the reorganization of the gendarmerie, my position is essentially an international one and I must consider myself someone working under the mandate of the Great Powers, who have accepted the Mürzsteg Plan.”

General de Robilant¹

In 1903, the Macedonian Question was at the roots of the first concerted European international intervention. The Mürzsteg Agreement, which was signed by the six great powers and the Ottoman Empire, was an attempt at common European diplomacy. The Mürzsteg Agreement, which was reached following the failure of the Illinden uprising launched by the Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, placed the three *vilayets* of Macedonia under the collective control of the great powers. Drawing on diplomatic reports, in this essay I emphasize the “spirit of Mürzsteg” and trace the process of the establishment of an international military and civil administration. The Mürzsteg Agreement gave a substantial peace-keeping role to a large group, including diplomats, military missions, two Civil Agents and their Ottoman counterparts. The paper studies the implementation of the Agreement. How did the ill-defined document lead to the emergence of new maps of Macedonia? In addition to the existing Ottoman administrative map, two others appeared as the three *vilayets* were divided into five international sectors, each of which was under the control of one of the great powers, and a “religious or mental map” of the region the site of bitter, violent religious-civil conflict began to emerge in 1904, when the two Orthodox churches of the Patriarchate and the Exarchate launched a campaign to convince the populations to declare themselves either Greek or Bulgarian. In conclusion, the paper assesses the legacy of the Mürzsteg Agreement. This short but meaningful episode represented an innovative approach in the policy of the great powers that was based on emerging concepts such as negotiation, collective action, and dialogue in a recognized international mandate. The concerted intervention of the six great European powers in Macedonia belongs to a broader process of evolution in the history of European international relations, a process that yielded more palpable results after 1918 with the establishment of the League of Nations and the emergence of a new, if short-lived, international order.

1 „Tout en étant au service ottoman pour la réorganisation de la gendarmerie, ma position est essentiellement internationale et je dois me considérer comme le mandataire des Grandes Puissances qui ont accepté l'entente de Mürzsteg.” Österreichisches Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv (Vienna) Politisches Archiv, (hereinafter ÖHHStA PA) XII. Turkey, vol. 328, Para to Aehrenthal, Salonika, June 20/2, 1908.

Keywords: Macedonia, international intervention, Mürzsteg Agreement, national question, administrative reforms

Introduction

In the fall of 1903, the Macedonian question acquired an international dimension for the great powers, the neighboring Balkans states, and the Macedonian national movement (IMRO), which indeed played the leading role in the affairs of this Ottoman province. The particular context in Macedonia offered a unique opportunity to the great powers to launch an international intervention based on the emerging concept of collective diplomacy, which resulted in an agreement later imposed on Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876–1909).

Several parameters shaped the Macedonian Question. The term “Macedonia” reflected a shifting and evolving concept in both time and space, both as a geographical expression and as a historical region. By 1900, the region was an Ottoman territory and a stake for the new Balkans states of Serbia, Greece, Romania and autonomous Bulgaria, which were struggling with the significant influence of the neighboring empires of Austria–Hungary and Russia. The Macedonian question was a plural reality as there was no “single Macedonia,” but rather several Macedonia(s) that coexisted simultaneously. The administrative Macedonia was composed of three Ottoman districts, the *vilayets* of Salonika, Monastir and Kosovo.² The multi-ethnic Macedonian population included less than 3,000,000 inhabitants. From the perspective of religion, Macedonia was divided between two Orthodox churches, the Patriarchate and the Exarchate, not to mention the division between the Christians and the Muslims and a substantial Jewish community living in Salonika.³ Finally, Macedonia as a potential state faced two major ongoing challenges, namely the building and recognition of its national identity and the delineation of its borders.

The entrance of Macedonia into the international arena resulted from the Illinden uprising, which was triggered by the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO), the goal of which was to free the three

2 Since in this essay I examine the foreign policy of the Great Power on the basis of diplomatic and military archives, I choose the toponyms used in the reports, Salonika not Thessaloniki, Monastir not Bitola, Uskub not Skopje.

3 The highly mixed population included Bulgarians, Greeks, Serbs, Vlachs, Gypsies, Turks and Albanians. By 1900, the Jewish population was estimated around 70,000 of 150,000 inhabitants.

vilayets from Ottoman rule.⁴ In October 1903, after three months of fighting, the revolutionary forces of 20,000 to 30,000 *comitadjis* were defeated by Ottoman III Army Corps.⁵ However, from IMRO's point of view the uprising brought a partial diplomatic success, as the attention of the great powers was finally directed towards the Macedonian Question. Why was there an international intervention? Without giving too much credit to international public opinion, one should note that the European press covered the uprising in a manner that prefigured the press coverage of the Balkans Wars ten years later. As an editorial in the *L'Illustration* emphasized, the press offered daily coverage of what was happening only "40 hours away from Paris."⁶ Also several committees, among them the Balkan Committee in London, were acting as influential groups and pleading the cause of the "Macedonian people."⁷ Nevertheless, the decisive role was played by the great powers or "the group of Two+Four," which led to the Macedonian Question gaining international status. On one side, Austria–Hungary and Russia occupied a decisive position in the region because of their geographical proximity, combined with their traditional and historical ties to the Balkans, best represented at that time by the compromise of 1897.⁸ On the other side, France, Great Britain, Italy and Germany had long-standing cultural interests in the region, as well as more recently developed economic interests. The railroad network was built thanks to invested funds from Paris, Vienna and Berlin.⁹

The origins of the international intervention were twofold. First, the immediate origins of the Mürzsteg Agreement were to be found in IMRO's program. Created in 1893, IMRO was the first organized movement that claimed "Macedonia" as an autonomous entity within the Ottoman Empire. IMRO's leaders, mostly schoolteachers, spread revolutionary propaganda with the intention of fostering a Macedonian national identity. At the same time, the

4 The organization bore several names over the course of its development. I use the most commonly found, IMRO.

5 Duncan M. Perry, *The Politics of Terror: The Macedonian Liberation Movements, 1893–1903* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

6 February 28, 1903. See also *Le Matin*, *Le Temps*, *Neue Freie Presse*, *The Daily News*.

7 Davide Rodogno, *Against Massacre. Humanitarian Intervention in the Ottoman Empire 1815–1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 235.

8 In May 1897, the Austro–Russian compromise established an informal division of the Balkans under the form of an exchange of letters.

9 Makedonka Mitrova, "The European Diplomacy and the First Railways in Ottoman Macedonia," in *Просторно планирање у Југоисточној Европи (до другог светског рата)*, ed. Vojana Miljković-Katić, (Belgrade, Institute of History and Institute for Balkan Studies of SANU, 2011), 549–68.

revolutionary committees, the *comitadjis*, conducted an armed struggle against any Ottoman's interests and structures. The Macedonian movement succeeded in establishing a climate of "permanent uprising" that was described at length by diplomats and travelers of the time.¹⁰ Second, the more distant origins of the intervention lay in the Berlin Treaty of 1878, which created a legal precedent for the involvement of the great powers in an Ottoman territory. Article 23 foresaw the implementation of reforms allowing Christians to participate in rulings on administrative matters with rights equal to those held by the Muslims. However, until 1903 these reforms were not implemented by the Ottoman authorities.

Using the Macedonian context this paper demonstrates how a shift toward a new international order took place with the Mürzsteg Agreement. The six great powers decided on a common solution for the Ottoman province and then unilaterally imposed a new administrative regime. This intervention was also influenced by new concepts, including the reestablishment of security and peace in devastated areas and the protection of civilian populations from military casualties. These concepts would play an increasingly significant role in the politics and diplomacy of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.¹¹

International Control in Macedonia and the "Spirit of Mürzsteg"

On 25 November, 1903, in the aftermath of the Illinden uprising and two months of intense negotiations, Sultan Abdülhamid II reluctantly accepted the Mürzsteg Agreement, a reform plan consisting of nine Articles. In accordance with the agreement, the three *vilayets* were placed under the collective international control of Austria-Hungary, Russia, France, Germany, Great Britain and Italy. The Mürzsteg Agreement simultaneously represented a break-up and the outcome of the international policy conducted up until then by the great powers in the Balkans. It was a break from the policy of intervention, which primarily took the form of military campaigns, and contributed significantly to the formation of the modern Balkan states and the defense of the Orthodox populations.

10 See the accounts from H. N. Brailsford, Victor Berard, Albert Sonnichsen, and Albert Malet. Around 1900, the French consul Louis Steeg (in Salonika) and the Austro-Hungarian August Kral (in Monastir) provided detailed descriptions of how IMRO was disrupting the Ottoman administrative network.

11 This essay follows a previous one: Nadine Akhund, "The Great Powers Policy in Macedonia before 1914," in *Der Erste Weltkrieg auf dem Balkan*, ed. Jürgen Angelow et al. (Berlin: Bebra Verlag, 2011), 13–34.

With the Mürzsteg Agreement, the great powers rejected the military option and opted for the concerted action of peacemaking.

The international intervention was binding for two years, it was renewed in 1905, and it applied to a clearly delimited space, the three *vilayets*. It also constituted a break from the traditional practice of military occupation, which meant the continued presence of troops on conquered (or liberated) territories, as was the case, for instance, in Bosnia Herzegovina in 1878.

The agreement was also the culmination of a process of implementation of reforms, which had begun with the discussion of changes in 1878 that had come up again in 1896. In fact, the new approach of the great powers in Macedonia was linked to and indeed closely followed two similar cases. One was Armenia (1895–96), where no intervention took place, and the other was Crete (1897–98), which can be seen as a “pre-Mürzsteg operation.” As Alois von Aehrenthal, Austrian Ambassador in Bucharest and later in St. Petersburg, commented with regards to the attitude of Vladimir Nikolayevich Lamsdorff, foreign minister of the Russian Empire from 1900 to 1906, “from the beginning, the Count [Lamsdorff] was partisan to follow the *modus procedendi* as implemented in Crete.”¹² At the time, unrest and violence near Kustendil (*vilayet* of Kossovo) and Melnik (*vilayet* of Salonika) led to the partial extension of a series of reforms, originally promulgated on 20 October, 1895 for the Armenian *vilayets*, to be partially extended to those of Macedonia in 1896.¹³ A supervisory committee was appointed to monitor the local authorities, control taxes, and encourage applications from non-Muslim elements in the administration. In 1897, following the brief Greek–Ottoman war and other continuous troubles, the island of Crete was placed under the supervision of the six great powers. However, Germany and Austria–Hungary withdrew their troops from the intervention in 1898. Following serious trouble in Macedonia during the winter of 1902, an embryonic reform program was adopted in December of 1902. Louis Steeg, the French consul in Salonika, suggested the nomination of foreign inspectors to supervise security as well as foreign instructors to command the gendarmerie.¹⁴

12 ÖHHStA PA XII Turkey, vol. 323, Aehrenthal to Goluchowski, Vienna, September 4, 1903. Vladimir Lamsdorff (1845–1907), foreign minister (1900–06). Agenor Goluchowski (1849–1921) foreign minister (1895–1906).

13 Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (Paris, hereinafter AMAE), CP Turkey, Arch. Amb. Macédoine vol. 139, Veillet-Dufreche to Cambon, Salonika, June 19, 1896. In 1895, tensions between Christian and Muslim communities concerning the lake of Van were rising. Also, Article 61 of the Berlin Treaty provided for the introduction of reforms in Armenia.

14 AMAE CP Turkey, vol. 29, Steeg to Delcassé, Salonika, December 15, 1902.

Later, in February of 1903, a specific six-point plan, the Viennese Plan, was set forth by Austro–Hungarian and Russian ambassadors. However, in the case of Mürzsteg, the concerted action of the six powers became a reality for four continuous years.

How was this international intervention undertaken? What was the mechanism? During the winter of 1903, Austria–Hungary and Russia played the leading role in the process of internationalizing the Macedonian Question. These two traditionally warring powers became the mediators and the leaders of a negotiated solution. This approach transformed what was originally a simple provincial revolt against the Sultan’s government into a matter of international diplomacy that required a consensus among seven parties to arrive at a settlement acceptable to all. First, Vienna and Saint Petersburg, while rejecting the military option, tried to maintain their exclusive position in Macedonian affairs, based on the status quo of 1897. However, they had to compromise, as France and Great Britain showed a stronger interest in the situation in Macedonia, even going so far as to suggest the venue of an international conference and the appointment of a Christian governor.¹⁵ The result was the Mürzsteg Agreement, an Austrian–Russian initiative taken to involve but at the same time to limit as much as possible the role and the influence of the other great powers, namely, France, Great Britain, Germany and Italy. The idea was to admit them as limited partners while emphasizing the concept of “Two+Four” even more and using Article 23 of the Berlin Treaty. Count Agenor Maria Adam Goluchowski, a Polish-born Austrian statesman credited with a *détente* in relations between the Austro–Hungarian Monarchy and the Russian Empire, wrote to his ambassador in Russia that the two Empires must on “the contrary keep more than ever in our hands the management of the affairs of the Balkan peninsula,” and he was skeptical about the Sultan’s willingness to agree with the concept of autonomy implied in Article 23.¹⁶ Ultimately, the agreement was simply imposed on the Ottoman government.

The Mürzsteg plan was based on three main concepts. In the short term, it reestablished security and order in the three *vilayets* with the collaboration of the Ottoman authorities. It also ensured assistance for the civilian populations,

15 Nadine Lange-Akhund, *The Macedonian Question 1893–1908. From Western Sources* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1998), 142. In September 1903, Lord Lansdowne, the British foreign minister, proposed the nomination of a Christian governor chosen outside of the Balkans, recalling the one in Eastern Rumelia after 1878.

16 ÖHHStA PA XII Turkey, vol. 316, Goluchowski to Calice, Vienna, September 4, 1903.

who had suffered greatly from months of fighting. From Vienna, Goluchowski used the terms “humanitarian action” and “pacifying action” in several reports to assess the conditions of civilians in terms of post military conflict situations related to the emerging international law.¹⁷ Finally, for the longer term, the Mürzsteg Agreement was designed to restructure the gendarmerie and the civil government radically through the implementation of reforms supervised by foreign officers and to provide for substantial representation of the Christians elements. The Mürzsteg Program was conceived as a form of combined civil and a military international control.

According to Article 1, Russia and Austria–Hungary were granted two administrators or Civil Agents to assist the Ottoman General Inspector in charge of the implementation of the reform program.¹⁸ Appointed in December of 1902 as part of the reform plan enacted by the Sultan, the Inspector General Hussein Hilmi Pasha (1857–1922) worked his entire life for the Ottoman government and enjoyed the confidence of Abdülhamid. Hilmi Pasha had previously been posted in Asia Minor, Damascus, and Yemen, where for seven years he demonstrated his skills as administrator. The French journalist Michel Paillares, who met him in Macedonia in 1904, wrote of him, “[h]e is a charmer, enjoyable, pleasant to meet... he has a prodigious capacity at work, he is of a tireless activity.”¹⁹ Heinrich Müller Roghoj (1853–1905), who was sent from Vienna, was familiar with the Balkans, since he had served in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1879. He spoke Turkish, Serbian, Bulgarian and Russian. As Consul General, he was stationed in Odessa. Nicolas Demerik, the Russian Civil Agent, had previously been posted in Beirut and Monastir. The Civil Agents took several steps immediately to address the issues linked to the aftermath of the insurrection. They secured funds to help refugees, who primarily sought refuge in Bulgaria, and rebuilt destroyed villages. They also oversaw the appointment of Christian rural guards in the villages, a function that was normally assumed by Muslims, who were responsible for significant tensions and even mistreatment of non-Muslim populations.²⁰ In addition, they received peasant delegations and filed their complaints against

17 Ibid.

18 The Civil Agents “are obliged to accompany the General Inspector everywhere, call his attention to the needs of the Christian population, indicate to him the abuses committed by local authorities, transmit their recommendations to the ambassadors in Istanbul, and inform their governments of all what happens in the country.” The original text was in French.

19 Michel Paillares, *L'imbroglio macédonien* (Paris: Stock, 1907), 328.

20 ÖHHStA PA XII Turkey, vol. 329, Calice to Goluchowski, Jenikoj, June 20, 1906. In 1906, out of 6,840 *Bekdjis*, 3,581 were Muslims and 3,259 were Christians.

the abuses of the administration. However, the decisions regarding the practical outcomes of these cases remained in the hands of the Ottomans. To assess the situation, the Civil Agents took inspection tours across the *vilayets* and visited prisons. However, they were escorted by Ottoman officers and used translators. Until their departure in 1908, these two men remained under the close supervision of Hilmi Pasha. If the relationships between the three men were cordial despite a certain ambiguity, the overall results of their actions remained limited. The Civil Agents certainly exerted a moral influence, as Hilmi Pasha had to take into consideration their constant presence at his side. According to a Russian report, the officers were “an element of European permanent control.”²¹

The reform of the gendarmerie, as defined by Article 2 of the Mürzsteg plan, foresaw the introduction of Christian elements in this military corps, which functioned primarily as a rural police force and traditionally was largely dominated by Muslims elements.²² The gendarmerie was a preventive and repressive police responsible for public security. The organization of the reform was entrusted to an Italian General, Emilio Degiorgis (1844–1908).²³ The three *vilayets* were divided into five sectors, each placed under the control of one of the great powers, with the exception of Germany. Berlin, seeking to preserve its good relations with the Sultan, decided to take on only the leadership of the new gendarmerie school created in Salonika. In each zone, an officer mission sent by the great powers was responsible for the reorganization of the local police in agreement with the Ottoman authorities. In May of 1904, the officers moved into their respective sectors, namely, France and Great Britain to Serres and Drama (Northeast of Salonika); the Russians to the southern section in the *vilayet* of Salonika; the Austrians to Uskub–Skopje (*vilayet* of Kossovo); and the Italians to the west of Monastir. The manner in which the sectors were divided up among the great powers clearly illustrated how Vienna and Saint Petersburg maintained their leadership in the Macedonian question. Because of its own strategic military interests, Vienna wanted to withdraw the districts where the majority population was Albanian from the reforms and also to prevent the *vilayet* of Monastir from being assigned to Italy. Indeed, if Rome succeeded in establishing its influence in Albania, notably among the Catholic-Albanian population, Italy would eventually control the Adriatic Sea, at the

21 AMAE CP Turkey, vol. 42, Report of Zinoviev published in *Le Messager Officiel*, November 23, 1904.

22 Reorganized in 1879, the gendarmerie was placed under the supervision of the War Ministry.

23 E. Degiorgis was nominated as “general réorganisateur.” After his death in 1908, his successor was General Mario Nicolas de Robilant (1855–1943).

north point of which was Pola (today Pula in Croatia), the Austro–Hungarian naval military base. After negotiations, the Albanian districts were excluded from the reforms, but the *vilayet* of Monastir was assigned to Italy. From 1904 to 1908 the relationship between Rome and Vienna remained tense. In addition, it was essential for the double monarchy to control the region around Uskub because of its proximity to Serbia. Vienna paid particular attention to the territorial ambitions of Belgrade, which were aimed at creating a “Greater Serbia” that would include the *vilayet* of Kossovo. As Russia was assigned the southern area around Salonika, these two powers held de facto control over the north–south strategic line of communication, Uskub–Salonika.

Between 1904 and 1908, 48 officers were sent to Macedonia, a low figure given the task at hand.²⁴ Originally, 60 officers were to be engaged, a temporary workforce that was to be increased up to 200, along with further implementation of the reforms. However, the opposition of the Sultan led the great powers to revise this figure.²⁵ The officers signed an individual contract for two years, then renewed it in 1906. They entered the Ottoman army with a rank superior to the rank they held in their own national army. In 1904, following the Vienna Plan, six officers from Norway, Sweden and Belgium were posted in Macedonia, two in the *vilayet* of Uskub, three in the *vilayet* of Salonika and one in the *vilayet* of Monastir.²⁶ Their mission was to reorganize the gendarmerie. The Sultan tried to integrate them into the officer corps newly hired, but the great powers refused. These six officers were not officially assimilated into the Mürzsteg Agreement. Diplomatic sources only mentioned them individually, and it seems that they were not treated as group with a specific status.

According to diplomatic and military sources, the Christian people greeted with relief the arrival of the foreign officers, who “were welcomed as a safeguard against administrative arbitrariness.”²⁷ In each sector, the officers requested the dismissal of the officers and policemen they evaluated as incompetent. However, as he had done with the Civil Agents, the Sultan refused to grant the officers the right to make decisions, and the Ottoman officials left pending requests for an indefinite period. The foreign officers’ role was limited to providing suggestions and advice. Until 1908, the Sultan refused to yield, despite repeated requests

24 ÖHHStA PA XII Turkey, vol. 323, Memorandum, Vienna, March 30, 1904.

25 Ibid., vol. 324, Calice to Goluchowski, Yenikoj, August 17, 1904. 54 officers and 140 non-commissioned officers.

26 Lange-Akhund, *The Macedonian Question*, 137–38.

27 AMAE CP Turkey, vol. 42, Steeg to Delcassé, Salonika, October 5, 1904.

from the chiefs of the military missions. Colonel Verand, Chief of the French mission, felt obliged to clarify the meaning of his men's mission: "First, it has been established that foreign officers do not have the effective command, you do not have the right to give orders."²⁸ The officers were also responsible for providing a better sense of duty and discipline to the Ottoman gendarmes and reorganizing the network of gendarmes-posts, known as *the karakols*, "the very basis of the reorganization, since the foundation of this institution guarantees the service of a good gendarmerie."²⁹ By 1908, a total of 184 *karakols* had been built and fully equipped.³⁰

In each sector, the officer responsible conducted inspection tours to supervise the working of the service, an essential function according to Colonel Verand. Because of the limited number of officers, each one supervised a large territory. During halts, he made sure that the villages were patrolled and the local gendarmes did not commit abuses, such as brutal searches or arbitrary arrests, and also engaged in talks with local leaders. Most of the officers knew at least one of the languages spoken in the area, or they learned Turkish.³¹ While improvement of the situation remained relative, the presence of the officer certainly encouraged the Ottoman military to show more restraint and limit excesses against civilians. On the ground, these officers met with the peasants who had taken part in the battles of the previous summer or been victims of the revolt and repression. The officers drew attention to the miserable conditions in which these peasants lived. They then realized that their mission had a complex political aspect. To what extent could they or should they denounce the abuses of an administration that had just hired them? Several officers sensitive to the fate of the peasants defended them in their reports. Michel Paillarès, who visited the French sector twice in 1904 and 1905, described at length how the officers felt "invested with a reforming zeal that would fix everything, straighten all."³² Until 1908, this issue remained unresolved. The fine line between the matters linked to the reorganization of the police force and matters that were more political remained unclear, as the peasants who joined IMRO's cause complained

28 Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre (hereinafter SHAT) (Paris) Turkey 7N1647, Report Colonel Verand, July 15, 1905.

29 ÖHHStA PA XII Turquie, vol. 328, report général de Robilant, Vienna, July 1908, 12.

30 Ibid., Report Robilant, 86.

31 SHAT officer's file, DP, Series 4–5. In the French mission, eight officers spoke German, eight Turkish, six Bulgarian and/or Serbian, two Greek and two Arabic languages.

32 Paillarès, *L'imbroglia*, 314. Paillares toured the French sector twice, along with captain Foulon and captain Sarrou.

purposely (or not?) about abuses committed by the gendarmes. Despite difficult living and hard working conditions, the officers performed their duties in the best possible way given the narrow margin of maneuvering. According to the reports from the French and Austrian missions, the daily living conditions were difficult. Isolation was often mentioned, as was uncertainty and communication problems resulting from IMRO's attacks, as well as the difficult climate, health problems, and cases of malaria.

To complete the picture of the international police, one should note the reactions of the Muslim populations. Overall the Muslims remained hostile to and irritated by the Mürzsteg program, which was perceived as a set of measures in support of Christians in a country where the official religion was Islam. The officers were seen as a symbol of military occupation with its resulting constraints. Captain Falconetti, French officer commented that the Turks "have adopted the conspiracy of silence, their attitude passive, quiet, while monitoring closely every move of the officer."³³ Colonel Léon Lamouche noted that "the Ottoman military regarded the foreign intervention as a deep humiliation for their country."³⁴ Up to 1908, the Ottoman authorities reluctantly implemented the reforms, following the direct orders of the Sultan. A complex personality, Abdülhamid II reigned for 32 years. Paul Cambon, the French ambassador to Istanbul, emphasized his acute intelligence and his comprehension of state affairs, guided by an extraordinary will to remain in power.³⁵ Abdülhamid had one objective, that was to preserve the territorial integrity of the empire and, consequently, to limit the intervention of the great powers, which was intolerable to him, as he was highly conscious of his political, spiritual and dynastic authority.³⁶

The Meanings of the Mürzsteg Agreement: Its Consequences, Limits, and Legacy

Intended originally only to be in effect for a limited period of time, the text of the Mürzsteg Agreement is relatively short, and the nine Articles were inadequately written in an assertive simple style, without an introduction. Overall,

33 SHAT Turkey 7N1647, L. Falconetti: *Mission française en Macédoine. Deux ans au service du sultan Abdul Hamid en 1905 et 1906.*

34 Léon Lamouche, *Quinze ans d'histoire balkanique 1904–1918* (Paris: Payot, 1928), 64.

35 Paul Cambon, *Correspondance 1870–1924*, vol. 2 (Paris: Grasset, 1940), 361.

36 François Georgeon, *Abdul Hamid II, le sultan Calife* (Paris: Fayard, 2003).

the agreement relied on a paradox, a fundamental misunderstanding, which was to become the cause of trouble and violence from 1904 to 1908. For the great powers, the Mürzsteg Agreement was viewed as a means of maintaining the status quo, a guarantee of stability which, although somewhat uncertain, was seen as preferable to the departure of the Turks and the disorder that would certainly follow. As the text was valid for all the Christians, it eliminated the national claims of Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria. However, the Christian people perceived the agreement as a guarantee of help from the great powers, and they later used it to justify their respective independence movements in Macedonia. During the spring of 1904, violence broke out and again there were massacres. This bloodshed involved not only the IMRO, but also national movements sustained by the Greek, Serbian, Bulgarian and even Romanian governments eager to achieve the “one nation within one state” concept. By then the delimitation and recognition of borders as part of the shaping of national identities had been fully integrated into the state building processes in the Balkans, as had happened earlier in the nineteenth century in the rest of the region. Despite its weaknesses and its malfunctions on the ground, in this context the Mürzsteg Agreement can be viewed as an attempt to move beyond the border concept. The establishment of an international administrative system could have transcended the national issues linked to the delimitation of borders. Unfortunately, the agreement produced the exact opposite, as one of its immediate outcomes was the emergence of a “second mental map” of Macedonia based on a combination of national and religious criteria.

What was the substance of Macedonian national identity in the aftermath of Illinden? In 1904, the concept was not strongly noticeable on the ground. “There is a Macedonia, but there are no Macedonians” is a concise formula that summarizes the impressions of diplomats.³⁷ The fact is that IMRO failed to awaken Macedonian national sentiment, as the defeat of the insurrection clearly demonstrated. The movement was probably too “young.” Indeed barely a decade had passed since its foundation. In addition, it was weakened by internal dissensions further worsened by personal antagonisms between its leaders. In 1904, people who had expected real change with the implementation of the reforms had grown disappointed. The text of Mürzsteg acted as a catalyst, worsening the situation considerably. The region found itself torn apart by bitter, violent religious-national conflict. Here one can speak of the

37 AMAE CP Turkey, vol. 26, October 15, 1901. Baron d’Avril. Brochure sent to Delcassé.

emergence of “mental and even religious borders” in Macedonia. The two Orthodox Churches, the Patriarchate and the Exarchate, sustained by Athens and Sofia respectively, launched a campaign to “convince” the populations to declare themselves either Greek or Bulgarian. This conflict had a double origin. First, the Bulgarian Exarchate was basing its strategies on the *firman* (decree) of 1870, according to which if two-third of the inhabitants of a locality opted for the Exarchate, they could join the Bulgarian Church. The territory under the Exarchate jurisdiction included parts of Eastern Macedonia. Around 1900, the influence of the Patriarchate declined significantly, and the number of Exarchate bishops multiplied. Second, Article 3 of the Mürzsteg Agreement, the content of which was ambiguous, indicated a future “modification in the delimitation of administrative units in view of a more normal grouping of different nationalities.” In the Ottoman context, people defined themselves by their religious affiliation, such as Patriarchate, Exarchate, or simply Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Jews etc. As Albert Malet indicated in 1903, “in Turkey, it is the religion, or rather the Church which determines nationality: one depends on the other and the Turks recognize a nationality only if it has an ecclesiastical hierarchy of its own.”³⁸ However astute this insight may have been, it did not exclude the fact that some people also felt genuinely Greek, Bulgarian, Serbian, or even Macedonian, more specifically in urban areas, where education was on the rise.

Since the notion of Macedonian national identity was limited, the Greek, Bulgarian, Serbs movements and IMRO, by anticipating future Ottomans decisions, estimated that membership in one of the two Churches would be the criteria retained by the Ottomans, not nationality. In fact, in 1905, the Ottoman authorities launched a census based on religious affiliation, a long, complex undertaking that began with the counting of houses. In her recent book, İpek Yosmaoğlu argues on the basis of Ottoman records that since the Ottomans had decided the census throughout the empire before the agreement, it was not the trigger of the violence.³⁹ However, the two Orthodox Churches, the Patriarchate and the Exarchate, adopted a radical position. The role of the Churches became instrumental, as the clergy, including several bishops, openly took up the Greek,

38 Albert Malet, “En Macédoine.” *Le Correspondant*, March 10, 1903, 981.

39 İpek Yosmaoğlu, *Blood Ties. Religion, Violence and the Politics of Nationhood in Ottoman Macedonia 1878–1908* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 148–54. The author is introducing an entirely new insight regarding the international intervention and Ottoman policy.

Bulgarian, or Serbian national point of view.⁴⁰ Religious affiliation and national identity therefore became closely interconnected. Joining the Patriarchate meant being “Greek,” while being affiliated with the Exarchate meant being “Bulgarian.” From 1904 to 1908, the diplomats noted a general decline in the situation and the exacerbation of hatred and daily violence, which they described as an open war among Christians.⁴¹ Furthermore, the role of the two Churches became overtly political, serving the unachieved national ambitions of the Balkan governments. “The conflict of nationalities in Macedonia arose as a fight between Churches more than as a fight of races,” commented Steeg.⁴² “The most odious attacks are between Bulgarians, Serbs and Greeks,” wrote Goluchowski, and “the murders follow, one after the other, the acts of wild revenge multiply.”⁴³ In 1907, alarmed by the gravity of the situation, the great powers attempted to provide a better definition of Article 3. In September, an Austrian–Russian note was sent to Athens, Sofia and Belgrade indicating that the territorial delimitation “will not in any case take into consideration the national changes resulting from the terrorist activities... this delimitation will instead be based on the principle of the status quo ante.”⁴⁴ However, the weak and vague formulation only added to the complexity of the situation and brought no improvement. The outcome was complex, as Macedonia, still an Ottoman territory with the *vilayets* administration, was divided along international delimitations as defined by the great powers and simultaneously along religious lines best represented by the fight between the two orthodox Churches and running along a North–South division of the region. The political and administrative delimitation did not correspond to the mental-religious ones.

The international efforts to stabilize the situation in Macedonia were undertaken by a large and substantial international group of military and non-military individuals. This group was formed to implement the reforms. Can one talk about “good governance”? Can this group be described as “professional experts” sent into the field? The mechanism was highly complicated and multiple actors were involved at different levels. On the civil side, there was the General Inspector and the two Civil Agents, who reported directly to their ambassadors.

40 Belgrade asked for the restoration of the Patriarchate of Peć, which had been abolished in 1766, and supported the claims from the Serbian population, located mainly in the *vilayet* of Kossovo.

41 Ibid., vol. 52, Bouliniere to Pichon, Athens, May 10, 1907.

42 Ibid., vol. 54, Steeg to Pichon, Salonika, October 4, 1907.

43 ÖHHStA PA XII Turkey, vol. 329, Goluchowski to Aehrenthal, Vienna, December 11, 1904.

44 AMAE CP Turkey, vol. 54, Austro–Russian note, September 30, 1907.

Both men were also in contact with their consuls in Macedonia and occasionally met with the ones from France, Great Britain, Italy and Germany, who watched over them closely. The two Civil Agents were crucial elements whose role and impact could have been decisive if they had had stronger personalities. Here, Vienna and Saint Petersburg bore some responsibility. Steeg and his Austro-Hungarian colleague, August Kral, described the Russian agent, Nicolas Demerik, as a weak, hesitant man, who was not very active or involved and had fragile health.⁴⁵ According to Michel Paillares, Demerik was a mere shadow of his Austro-Hungarian colleague, and he simply approved of everything he was told.⁴⁶ Heinrich Müller de Roghoj also had health problems and died in 1905. He was replaced by Richard Oppenheimer, who had previously been posted at the Pireus. On the military side, the international military commission included no less than 15 people. The general in charge of the reorganization of the gendarmerie was assisted by two officers, one Italian and one Russian. The six military delegates were chiefs of the military missions without a former contract with the Ottomans authorities. Finally, the six military attachés from the great powers were included as part of the commission, so as not to forget the officers in their sectors. Symbolically, the meetings between the six ambassadors or the military delegates always took place at the Austro-Hungarian embassy under the patronage of Ambassador Heinrich Calice (1830–1912), the doyen of the diplomats posted in Istanbul.

Adding to the complexity of the system, the Mürzsteg program did not define the relationship between the Civil Agents and their military counterparts precisely. The former were to “watch over the implementation of the reforms and the appeasement of the populations,” while the latter were in charge of the reform of the gendarmerie.⁴⁷ As noted above, the officers sent the peasants’ complaints to the Civil Agents or the ambassadors, who occasionally transmitted them to the Ottoman authorities. Could the reorganization of the gendarmerie be placed under the supervision of the Civil Agents? Certainly not, but in 1904 the Austrian–Hungarians did suggest subordinating the international military structure to a mixed council under the control of two representatives from Vienna and Saint Petersburg.⁴⁸ The initiative was taken by the Austro–Hungarian

45 Ibid., vol. 39, Steeg to Delcassé, Salonika, February 8, 1904.

ÖHHStA PA XXXVIII Monastir vol. 393, Kral to Goluchowski, December 21, 1903.

46 Paillares, *L’imbroglio*, 330.

47 For details about the officers, see Akhund, *The Macedonian Question*, 173–86.

48 ÖHHStA PA XII, Turkey, vol. 325, Muller to Goluchowski, Salonika, May 1, 1904.

military attaché, Vladimir von Giesl. Hilmi Pasha approved it, as he estimated that the more complex the international administration became, the less efficient it would be. The French, British, and Germans rejected the project and it was abandoned. If the relationships between the Civil Agents and the General Inspector remained cordial and courteous (though dominated by Hilmi Pasha), the relationships between the Civil Agents and General Degiorgis were tense. Their personalities were too divergent for them to have been able to find a common language. Degiorgis showed a non-conformist and debonair attitude regarding the Ottomans, which seemed too familiar and shocked Müller de Roghoj and Demerik.⁴⁹

Behind the Mürzsteg Agreement lay the political game of the great powers, wavering between support for the somewhat justified national aspirations of the Christians in Macedonia and maintenance of the political stability of the region by tolerating the heavy-handed approach of the Sultan. While they had been unanimous in setting up the agreement, each used it to reinforce its own position in the region and further its own political or economic influence within the Ottoman Empire. In Macedonia, each chief of the military delegation, i.e. each officer, remained first and foremost a delegate of the Great Power he represented, and thus linked to its politics, traditions and customs. Occasionally, some found themselves in contradiction with representatives of the other great powers. There is little trace in the reports of any sense of solidarity between the officers or the chiefs of the mission.

Finally, the reforms comprised of the superimposition of an existing administration without the introduction of any real changes. They consisted of a multiplication of complex international machinery, the functions of which remained inadequately defined. Nevertheless, on the one hand, the text of Mürzsteg provided a common basis for collective action among the great powers and prevented the abandonment of the reforms. The text thus helped to maintain the integrity of the Ottoman Empire, which was increasingly fragile. On the other hand, one must recall the European international context, as the years between 1904 and 1908 correspond to the strengthening of the military alliances, the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente, further reducing the likelihood of any long-term policy based on cooperation among the great powers.

49 ÖHHStA PA XXXIX, vol. 2, Muller to Goluchowski, Monastir, July 3, 1904, AMAE CP Turkey, vol. 45, Reverseaux to Rouvier, Vienna, July 26, 1905.

In addition to these considerations, one should also ask the question regarding the reality of the Macedonian issue. To what extent did support for the Macedonian cause or the promotion of the partition of the *vilayets* between the Balkans states present a real interest for the great powers from the perspective of international policy? As a map of the region makes clear, since the railway network consisting of three major lines that allowed access to the Mediterranean Sea, the port of Salonika was of the greatest potential interest to the great powers. The town had 150,000 inhabitants and occupied the third rank in terms of economic activity after Istanbul, Beirut and Izmir (Smyrna). The modernization of the infrastructures of this port was completed in 1905. The true importance of Macedonia thus would be more one of an economic than political nature.

Between 1905 and 1907, the Mürzsteg Agreement produced an unexpected outcome by ending the exclusive domination that Vienna and Saint Petersburg had maintained not only in Macedonia but in the Balkans since 1897. The weight of the “Agreement for Two” dominated the Macedonian question, thus slowing the process of application of the reforms, as the two powers, while neutralizing their traditional rivalry in the area, also slowed down as far as they could the meddling of Paris, London, Berlin and Rome. In 1905, the great powers further pursued the implementation of the reforms laid down in Articles 4 and 8 of the Mürzsteg program in finance and justice. However, the implementation of these reforms was never more than partial, indicating both the strength of the Sultan’s position and the limits of the international consensus.

In Macedonia, the financial situation was reaching a critical point as the deficit for the three *vilayets* reached more than 600,000 Turkish pounds.⁵⁰ The governors had to answer to the sudden orders from the Sultan, who was asking for more funds. Numerous administration officials had not been paid for months. Extortion of funds and corruption were common, especially among members of the police force. The financial reform resulted from an Austro–Russian initiative, and it was the last one taken by the two ambassadors, each of whom was an expert in Ottoman policy. Both Heinrich Calice and Ivan Zinoviev⁵¹ played a key role in

50 Steven W. Soward, *Austria’s policy of Macedonian Reform 1902–1908*. East European Monographs, 260 (New York–Boulder, Co.: Columbia University Press, 1989), 112.

51 Ivan Zinoviev (1835–1917): Russian diplomat, he was posted in Romania (1872–76), Persia (1876–83) and Stockholm (1891–97). Nominated ambassador in Istanbul in 1897, he remained there until 1909. Defending a moderate approach in the Macedonian affairs, he criticized his colleague posted in Sofia, Bachmedieff for his openly pro-Bulgarian attitude. However, Zinoviev was personally “protecting”/in favor of the Serbian population living in the *vilayet* of Kossovo.

the process. The first had been stationed in Istanbul since 1880 and the second since 1897. They proposed placing the income, expenditures and annual budget of the three *vilayets* under the triple control of Hilmi Pasha, the two Civil Agents and the supervision of an international financial commission of four delegates named by France, Great Britain, Italy, and Germany. This project was promptly rejected by Abdülhamid. The Sultan then requested an increase in tariffs of 3 percent, from 8 percent to 11, to meet the extraordinary expenses resulting from the situation in Macedonia. Multiple notes, drafts and counter-drafts were exchanged between the Sultan and the representatives of the great powers, using the ambassadors of Vienna and Saint Petersburg as intermediaries. In November of 1905, the Sultan persisted in his refusals. At the proposal of the Austro–Hungarian government, the powers sent an international squadron of eight battleships and an armed force of 3,000 men to conduct a naval demonstration under the walls of Istanbul.⁵² On 25 November, the international force left Piraeus for the island of Mytilene and then Lemnos and seized the customs, post and telegraph offices. On 5 December, the Sultan yielded. Macedonian finances were placed under the control of the international financial commission, which remained active until 1908. The most serious defect according to a French report was that military expenses were not included among the responsibilities of the financial commission.⁵³ Its enforcement also was limited because of the troubled situation in Macedonia and the misunderstandings among the members of the commission.

Here one should note that the military option, as a coercive method, was indeed a significant part of the Mürzsteg program. It carried considerable weight as a potential threat to guarantee the implementation of the reforms. The Sultan protested against such “direct interference” by foreign representatives “in purely domestic affairs of the country, as such action prejudiced its independence and its sovereign rights, which the powers had repeatedly and solemnly committed to respect.”⁵⁴ As France, Great Britain, Germany and Italy were represented in the permanent institution, recognized by the Ottoman government, this financial reform ended the “exclusive control” that Vienna and Saint Petersburg had maintained over the Macedonian Question within the Mürzsteg Agreement. Furthermore, if the gendarmerie reform was part of an agreement signed for

52 Austria–Hungary, Russia, France, Great Britain, and Italy. Germany refused to take part, but offered moral support.

53 AMAE CP Turkey, vol. 46, Boppe to Rouvier, Therapia, October 26, 1905.

54 *Ibid.*, October 1, 1905.

only a limited period of time, the financial reform resulted from a separate text fully acknowledged by the consensus of the great powers and the Sultan.

Two years later, in 1907, at Russia's initiative, the great powers proposed to establish international control over the Macedonian judicial system, which was undermined by corruption, and to introduce Christians into the courts of justice.⁵⁵ Based on a complex arrangement, the functioning of the justice system would be supervised by six inspectors (three Christians and three Muslims) and would be dependent on the Financial Commission. The great powers could not agree either on the procedure to nominate the inspectors or on the question of whether or not they were to be from Europe, as was suggested by London, or subjects of the Ottoman Empire, as was favored by Vienna. Following several unsuccessful meetings between the six ambassadors in Istanbul, the project was finally adjourned in February 1908.

At another level, the Mürzsteg Agreement and the observations made in the diplomatic sources demonstrate a turning point in international affairs within diplomatic circles of the time. As already noted, the military option was disregarded and collective action was taken. The pragmatic approach chosen by Vienna and Saint Petersburg was guided by the increasing interest shown by Paris and London in Macedonia. One can describe the approach of the great powers in this regard in terms of contemporary crisis management theory. The foreign offices of the great powers opted to respond to and address the crisis with a certain opportunism, as Paris and London would finally have been able to play a larger role in Macedonian affairs, or, at least as they hoped, would have the option to do so. The collective intervention as undertaken in Macedonia belongs to a wider movement that was slowly emerging at the same time. A concept of international law was emerging as a corollary of the Peace Movement that appeared on the European stage at the end of the Crimean war. The Peace Movement linked economic prosperity to peace that can only be achieved through collective diplomacy. War was not going to disappear, but the rules of war should be codified through international law. Also, prevention of conflict appeared as a solution, along with collective foreign intervention to diffuse any crisis and thus ameliorate tensions. The Mürzsteg Agreement was framed by the Peace Movement, as best represented by the two Hague conferences of 1899

55 ÖHHStA PA XII Turkey, vol. 338, Aehrenthal to Goluchowski, Saint Petersburg, January 23, 1906.

and 1907.⁵⁶ However, the Peace Movement was swimming against the tide, as ultimately the war movement proved to be stronger.⁵⁷

Finally, one should note that several of the concepts included in the Mürzsteg Agreement revolved around one major idea, namely the fates of civilians during times of war. The conditions of the civilian in a time of war acquired an official status ten years later, at the end of the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, with the international commission sent by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace to investigate the treatment of civilians.⁵⁸ These concepts, which included the needs of the Christian population in the aftermath of the uprising, the issues of the refugees and displaced peoples, their return, the examination of crimes that were committed during the insurrection, and certain practical measures, such as the exoneration of taxes for civilians in order to improve living conditions of victims and refugees, were emphasized in the Carnegie Report. In addition, one of the major figures at the Carnegie Endowment, Paul d'Estournelles de Constant (1852–1924), the director of the Carnegie European office in Paris and a convinced peace activist, was also involved in the cause of the Macedonian people. In 1903, he organized a large meeting in Paris to draw the attention of the French government to the miserable living conditions of the “oppressed Christian people” in the three *vilayets*.⁵⁹

Conclusion

How should one assess the legacy of the Mürzsteg Agreement? It has been largely dismissed for its failure to bring peace and stability to Macedonia. Until recently, historians interpreted the international intervention merely as an Austrian–Russian manoeuvre, arguing that Saint Petersburg was deeply involved in the Far East and Vienna refused to go to war for an ill-defined Macedonian entity. If the agreement was largely dominated by Saint Petersburg and Vienna, it was also based on a strong refusal to choose the military option, combined with the equally strong will to implement reforms through collective negotiation. The mechanism was highly innovative for its time, and the fact that, in accordance

56 The Hague conferences of 1899 and 1907 gathered 26 and 44 states to discuss world issues. They constituted the first attempt to provide an institutional framework for the Peace Movement.

57 The rejection of the military option is valid only for Macedonia, as the Greek–Ottoman war (1897), the Boxers rebellion (1901), and the Russian–Japanese war (1905) demonstrated.

58 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Report of the International Commission to Inquire the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan Wars* (London–Washington: Carnegie Endowment, 1914).

59 Rodogno, *Against Massacre*, 235. The author provides an in-depth description of the public meeting.

with its provisions, representatives of the six great powers sat together in discussion was an achievement in and of itself.

The program of Mürzsteg put Macedonia in a peculiar position, placing it, a territory of the Ottoman Empire, under the control of the six great powers with the reluctant agreement of the Sultan. While the Mürzsteg Agreement failed to establish autonomy or independence in Macedonia, it reinforced the perception of the region as a single political entity that in the future could become an independent state. The agreement represented an innovative approach in the foreign policy of the great powers, based on negotiation and collective action in a recognized time-limited international mandate.

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