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The Beginning of the 1875 Serbian Uprising in Herzegovina The British Perspective

Abstract: The main goal of this article is to scrutinize the contemporary British sources, in order to establish what they say about the causes of the insurrection in Herzegovina which marked the beginning of the Eastern Crisis of 1875–1878. The official reports of British diplomats, the observations of newspaper correspondents, and the instructions of London policy makers support the conclusion that the immediate cause of the insurrection was agrarian discontent, especially tithing. In considering the “external influences” on the outbreak of the insurrection, the British emphasized the role of Austria-Hungary and Montenegro. Behind these countries, they saw the shadow of the Three Emperors’ League, which was perceived as the main threat to the Ottoman Empire and, consequently, to the balance of power in Europe. Serbia was not seen as directly involved in the events in Herzegovina. Later on, at the time of Prince Milan’s visit to Vienna, and as volunteers from Serbia began to be despatched to Herzegovina, the British diplomats increasingly perceived Serbia, in addition to Montenegro, as another tool of the Three Emperors’ League.

Keywords: Great Britain, Foreign Office, uprising in Herzegovina, Eastern Question, Austria-Hungary, Montenegro, Serbia, Russia

It is a well known fact that the Eastern Crisis of 1875–1878 was sparked by an uprising of unruly highlanders in Herzegovina. But there is no definitive explanation as to why and how the Herzegovinian uprising began. That means that we do not know exactly why one of the most dangerous European crises of the nineteenth century broke out.

All authors consider the causes of the Herzegovinian uprising to be the result of a specific mix of domestic and foreign influences. Most of them see the immediate cause in agrarian discontent. However, all unanimity of opinion disappears when it comes to explaining the “external” factor. Both Miloš Ekmečić and Vasa Čubrilović suggest that it was a national revolt of the Serbs, but they also emphasize the importance of the 1858 Ottoman land law and land reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina, after Omar Pasha Latas finally crushed the resistance of the local Muslim nobility. The state-owned *timars* were turned into *begs*’ private property, which bitterly disappointed the Christian serfs, shattering their last hopes of regaining their former *bashtinas* from the Sultan’s state property. Both Ekmečić and Čubrilović lay emphasis on the peasants’ being enraged at the Ottoman tax system, and especially at merciless tithing collectors. There were also influences from Montenegro, Serbia,

Austria-Hungary and Russia, but rather than being the cause of the insurrection, they gained real importance only during its course.¹ However, Ekmečić also stresses the Balkan aspirations of the Three Emperors' League, notably Austria-Hungary which exerted influence on the movement in Herzegovina through the local Catholic population; there even are indications of the Dual Monarchy's cooperation with the Prince of Montenegro, Nikola I Petrović.² David Harris likewise argues that the immediate cause of the insurrection is to be found in "rental obligations and more especially in the ruthless taxation suffered by the Christian population".³ Moreover, he emphasizes that it was a national revolt, rooted in the tradition of the "ballads lamenting 'the damned day of Kosovo'".⁴ Also, the peasants of Herzegovina were perfectly aware of their relatives' much better living conditions in the neighbouring Habsburg Empire, in Serbia or in Montenegro.⁵ David Mackenzie contends that the revolt was a "spontaneous protest by the Christian merchants and peasants against heavy taxation and oppressive rule" and that "there is no evidence that insurrection was organised by an outside power".⁶ Humphrey Sumner agrees with Arthur Evans, the *Manchester Guardian* correspondent at the time, that the "insurrection was in its origin Agrarian rather than Political", but adds that it "became a weapon in the hands of Austrian, Russian, and Serbian Slav societies, of Montenegrin captains, and of the *pandours* of the border district".⁷

¹ M. Ekmečić, *Dugo kretanje između klanja i oranja: Istorija Srba u Novom veku (1492–1992)* (Belgrade: Zavod za udžbenike, 2007), 269–278; M. Ekmečić, *Stvaranje Jugoslavije*, vol. II (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1989), 279–282; M. Ekmečić, *Ustanak u Bosni 1875–1878* (Belgrade: Službeni list SRJ and Balkanološki institut SANU, 1996), 25–92; V. Čubrilović, *Bosanski ustanak 1875–1878* (Belgrade: Službeni list SRJ and Balkanološki institut SANU, 1996), 19–28, 45–52. On the land reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina, see also D. Berić, *Ustanak u Hercegovini 1852–1862* (Belgrade–Novi Sad: SANU, 1994), 587–620; V. Popović, *Agrarno pitanje u Bosni i turski neredi za vreme reformnog režima Abdul-Medžida (1839–1861)* (Belgrade: SANU, 1949), 279–285. On different aspects of the 1858 land law see H. Inalcik and D. Quataert, *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire*, vol. II: 1600–1914 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 856–861.

² Ekmečić, *Dugo kretanje*, 278–279; Ekmečić, *Stvaranje Jugoslavije* II, 283–284; see also Čubrilović, *Bosanski ustanak*, 52–57.

³ D. Harris, *A Diplomatic History of the Balkan Crisis of 1875–1878: The First Year* (Stanford University Press and Oxford University Press, 1936), 17.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ D. MacKenzie, *The Serbs and Russian Pan-Slavism 1875–1878* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 31.

⁷ B. H. Sumner, *Russia and the Balkans 1870–1880* (Hamden, CT and London: Archon Books, 1962), 141; A. J. Evans, *Through Bosnia and Herzegovina on Foot, During the*

George Hoover Rupp, on the other hand, tends to lay emphasis on foreign influences, particularly “the intrigues and propaganda of both the Pan-Slavs and the agents of the Bosnian minded Military Group in Austria”, arguing that “of these the Pan-Slavs were much more active”.⁸ Pan-Slav intrigues were the main cause of the insurrection according to Wertheimer’s biography of Andrassy as well,⁹ which in fact was a view shared by a large part of European public opinion at the time of the insurrection. According to the recently published documents from Russian archives, however, the Russian consuls in Mostar, Sarajevo and Dubrovnik believed that the uprising was caused by heavy taxation and Ottoman incompetence. Moreover, they suspected that there was secret Austrian influence among the insurgents.¹⁰ Robert William Seton-Watson, although describing the situation in the Ottoman Empire, and in Bosnia-Herzegovina, as “untenable”, put emphasis on the ambitions of the military party in Vienna, especially one of its leaders, the governor of Dalmatia, General Gavriilo Rodić, who was “in secret contact with the Bosnian leaders”.¹¹ Seton-Watson also remarked that the Russian consul in Dubrovnik, Alexander Yonin, was “in direct contact with the insurgent chiefs”.¹² According to Mihailo D. Stojanović, the insurrection “was the result of the propaganda and preparations which Serbia carried out with the view of organising a general rising of the Christians”.¹³ More than agrarian conditions, influences from Serbia, Montenegro, Austrian Dalmatia and Croatia are stressed in Richard Millman’s work.¹⁴

The main goal of this article is to scrutinize the contemporary British sources in order to establish what they say about the causes of the 1875 insurrection in Herzegovina. The main source of information will be the re-

Insurrection, August and September 1875 (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1877), 334–336.

⁸ G. H. Rupp, *A Wavering Friendship: Russia and Austria 1876–1878* (Harvard University Press and H. Milford Oxford University Press, 1941), 5.

⁹ E. von Wertheimer, *Graf Julius Andrassy, sein Leben und seine Zeit*, vol. II (Stuttgart: Stuttgart Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1943), 251.

¹⁰ Yonin to Jomini, Ragusa, 5/7 July 1875, published in *Rossija i vosstanie v Bosnii i Gercegovine 1875–1878: Dokumenty*, eds. V. I. Kosik et al. (Moscow: Indrik, 2008), 17–24.

¹¹ R. W. Seton-Watson, *Disraeli, Gladstone and the Eastern Question. A Study in Diplomacy and Party Politics* (London: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd, 1971), 18.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³ M. Stojanović, *The Great Powers and the Balkans 1875–1878* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939), 13–18.

¹⁴ R. Millman, *Britain and the Eastern Question 1875–1878* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 15.

ports produced in July and August 1875 by the British diplomats serving in the region, being closest to the events. The opinions of London policy makers and British newspaper correspondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina will be analyzed as well.

In June and July 1875, when the uprising broke out, most diplomats were on vacation in European spas and capitals. By contrast, the British consuls in Sarajevo and Dubrovnik, as well as the ambassador in Constantinople, were at their offices, busy gathering information and sending reports to Lord Derby, foreign secretary in the Conservative cabinet of Benjamin Disraeli.

A pronounced Turkophile, as the contemporary British diplomats serving in the Balkans tended to be,¹⁵ the British consul in Sarajevo, William Holmes, relied almost exclusively on information supplied by Dervish Pasha, governor general of Bosnia, and by other Ottoman officials. Holmes knew about Austria-Hungary's aspirations regarding Bosnia and Herzegovina,¹⁶ but his reports of June 1875 described Montenegro as the main troublemaker in Herzegovina. He was aware of the policies of Prince Nikola, who was using his influence in this troubled region to extract territorial gains from the Porte. Holmes supported the Ottoman effort to settle the border question with Montenegro through Constant Effendi's diplomatic mission to Cetinje. He shrewdly analyzed the position of Montenegro in relation to the Ottoman Empire: "The possession of Montenegro for Turkey would simply be a large and useless expense, and quarrels with her have the same result without any possible advantage. It is therefore interest of Turkey that Montenegro should be friendly, peaceful and contented."¹⁷ Nonetheless, he reported that Prince Nikola, whom he described as a man of "bad faith" who did not "carry out his engagements",¹⁸ "has hopes that some time or other Bosnia and the Herzegovina will come under his government, but in the case of complications arising which give these provinces to Austria, he knows that his aspirations will be unattainable."¹⁹

¹⁵ G. L. Iseminger, "The Old Turkish Hands: The British Levantine Consuls, 1856–1876", *Middle East Journal* 22/3 (1968), 297–316; see also The Duke of Argyll, *The Eastern Question. From the Treaty of Paris 1856 to the Treaty of Berlin 1878, and to the Second Afghan war*, vol. I (London: Strahan & Company Limited, 1879), 36–41; M. Ković, "Vojvoda Argajl i Istočno pitanje", *Mitološki zbornik* 19 (2008), 138.

¹⁶ The National Archives (NA), Foreign Office (FO), 1875, 195, vol. 1061, Holmes to Elliot, Bosna Serai, 1 July 1875.

¹⁷ NA, FO, 1875, 195, vol. 1061, Holmes to Elliot, Bosna Serai, 18 June 1875.

¹⁸ NA, FO, 1875, 195, vol. 1061, Holmes to Elliot, Bosna Serai, 1 July 1875.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Holmes expressed suspicion about Montenegro in the very first report on the disturbances he sent on 2 July 1875. He claimed that everything was organized by a group of 164 refugees from Herzegovina, who had wintered in Montenegro, and then reappeared in Herzegovina in revolt, killing everyone who tried to negotiate with the Ottoman authorities.²⁰ Dervish Pasha told Holmes that Prince Nikola was not involved in the events, but he was not so sure that his Montenegrins were “equally blameless”.²¹ Constant Effendi informed Holmes about his mission to Cetinje, claiming that the Prince assured him that the disturbances were the result of “the Servian intrigue”: “He spoke bitterly of Serbia, and said she was always endeavouring to put him in a false position, and make the Turks to think he was ‘incorrible’.”²² The Prince allegedly expressed his belief that “at the bottom of the present disturbance” was “the priest called Nikifor”, who was “the constant instrument of the Servian intrigue”.²³ He was obviously trying to divert attention towards Serbia and put the blame for all the troubles on Nićifor Dučić, a monk, historian and guerrilla leader from Herzegovina, his close collaborator in the past, who was now living in Belgrade. As we shall see, however, the reports of the British consuls were not to refer to Serbia as the probable instigator of the disturbances in Herzegovina until August 1875, while Dučić’s name had never resurfaced.

On the other hand, Holmes was perfectly aware of the everyday hardships that the Herzegovinian peasants faced: “There is no doubt that these people feel oppressed and overtaxed. The Government is always urging the sale of the taxes at yearly increasing and really exorbitant prices, and in all complaint invariably side with the purchasers, being interested to secure them a profit to ensure still higher bidding the ensuing year.”²⁴ He also knew that the small town of Nevesinje, where the uprising was to be ignited, was not included in a more lenient taxation system established in the neighbouring districts after their rebellion of 1861.²⁵

The attack on a Turkish caravan at Cvetna Poljana (Flowery Field) near Nevesinje carried out on 5th July was reported by Holmes four days

²⁰ NA, FO, 1875, 195, vol. 1061, Holmes to Elliot, Bosna Serai, 2 July 1875. On these refugees, see V. Čubrilović, *Bosanski ustanak*, 55–57. On the role of Montenegro in the outbreak of the uprising see also V. Ćorović, “Hercegovački ustanak 1875. godine”, in *Spomenica o Hercegovačkom ustanku 1875. godine* (Belgrade: Odbor za podizanje Nevesinjskog spomenika, 1928), v–xix.

²¹ NA, FO, 1875, 195, vol. 1061, Holmes to Elliot, Bosna Serai, 2 July 1875.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

later. According to his account, “the disaffected peasants robbed the caravan and decapitated five innocent Turkish merchants”.²⁶ Holmes also reported that another “band” of rebels had seized the bridge over the Krupa river, cutting the road between Mostar and Metković.²⁷

Holmes failed to mention that this “band” was made up of Catholics, which was a trail that could lead to Vienna and nourish old suspicions, rekindled in April and May 1875 by the Emperor Franz Joseph’s long visit to Dalmatia, where he received the Catholics from Herzegovina and listened compassionately to their grievances. In Kotor he met the Prince of Montenegro. Some historians believe that the Montenegrin Prince and the Habsburg Emperor came to an understanding, and that Prince Nikola might have had Russian support in that. It is known that the Crown Council convened in Vienna on 29 January 1875 had already made the decision to send Habsburg troops into Bosnia and Herzegovina should a conflict arise between Montenegro and the Ottoman Empire. In May 1875, shortly after Franz Joseph left Dalmatia, the Montenegrin Prince asked the Three Emperors’ League to countenance Montenegro’s territorial expansion.²⁸

A day after Holmes sent his report, the British chargé d’affaires in Vienna, R. Percy Ffrench, forwarded to Derby the telegram he had just received from Dubrovnik, where consul Taylor informed him about fighting on the Krupa, but also noted that the insurgents “have hoisted Austrian flag at two places”.²⁹ In Taylor’s view, “Montenegro seemingly directs the revolt underhand”.³⁰ A few days later, Percy Ffrench sent a more detailed report about the clashes on the Krupa and at Rasno, describing the flight of refugees from the lower Neretva to Metković in Austrian territory. As he also remarked, “the suspicion exists that the whole thing may have been fomented by the southern Pan-Slavists in order to disturb and to create confusion in the relations between Austria and Turkey”.³¹ Percy Ffrench did not specify who those “southern Pan-Slavists” were — pro-Russian Pan-Slavs or South-Slav agitators from Dalmatia.

²⁶ NA, FO, 1875, 195, vol. 1061, Holmes to Elliot, Bosna Serai, 9 July 1875. On the attack of Pero Tunguz’s *bajduks* on a Turkish caravan on 5 July, see D. Tunguz-Perović, “Nevesinjska puška”, in *Spomenica o Hercegovačkom ustanku*, 45–54; Čubrilović, *Bosanski ustanak*, 59–60.

²⁷ NA, FO, 1875, 195, vol. 1061, Holmes to Elliot, Bosna Serai, 9 July 1875.

²⁸ Rupp, *Wavering Friendship*, 34–45; Ekmečić, *Dugo kretanje*, 278–279; Ekmečić, *Stvaranje Jugoslavije II*, 283–284.

²⁹ NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, Ffrench to Derby, Vienna, 10 July 1875.

³⁰ Ibid.; M. Ković, “Velika Britanija i Bosna i Hercegovina u Istočnoj krizi (1875–1878)”, *Zbornik za istoriju Bosne i Hercegovine* 6 (2009), 161–162.

³¹ NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, Ffrench to Derby, Vienna, 15 July 1875.

When Holmes eventually learnt from Dervish Pasha that both Catholics and Orthodox took part in the revolt, he worriedly described the situation as “a circumstance which has never before occurred in troubled times”.³² He pointed to the fact that the Austrian Vice-Consul in Trebinje and a number of Roman Catholic priests had left Herzegovina for Dalmatia in fear of Muslim retribution. Although Dervish Pasha claimed “that their departure has been made with the sole intention of increasing the agitation”,³³ a few days later Holmes reported that, thanks to the influence of the bishop of Mostar and some Christian and Muslim “notables”, the Catholics “retired to their homes”.³⁴

The correspondent for the *Times* in Herzegovina, William James Stillman, a Pre-Raphaelite painter and photographer, who had supported the Cretan uprising of 1866–1869 while serving as U.S. consul in Crete,³⁵ maintained that the immediate cause of the insurrection in Herzegovina was the injustice and violence which were chronic and endemic in the Ottoman Empire.³⁶ He also believed, however, that it was inspired by Franz Joseph’s visit to Dalmatia. In his view, it started as a revolt of “the Catholic population between Popovo and Gabela”, who “anticipated an Austrian intervention”.³⁷ While travelling to Herzegovina in late August 1875, he found in Trieste “a committee for aiding the movement”, whose “political tone” was “distinctly Austrian, and the members of the committee were all Dalmatians, with whom, as with the Dalmatian patriots generally, the best end of the affair would be the union of Bosnia and part, at least, of Herzegovina to Dalmatia. There was no Russian leaning or influence”.³⁸ Consequently, at the very beginning the insurrection was “entirely in the hands of the Austrian Slavs, the committees of Zara and Ragusa being the chief”.³⁹ Stillman observed that at that time the Catholics were “the most enthusiastic in the revolt” and that “the Austrian authorities showed an ex-

³² NA, FO, 1875, 195, vol. 1061, Holmes to Elliot, Bosna Serai, 24 July 1875.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ NA, FO, 1875, 195, vol. 1061, Holmes to Elliot, Bosna Serai, 29 July 1875.

³⁵ See W. J. Stillman, *The Cretan Insurrection of 1866–7–8* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1874); W. J. Stillman, *The Autobiography of a Journalist*, vol. II (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1901), 398–453.

³⁶ W. J. Stillman, *Herzegovina and the Late Uprising: The Causes of the Latter and the Remedies* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1877), 1–2, 8–9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2–3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

traordinary amount of complaisance to the insurgents".⁴⁰ "But the Catholics were tindery fuel, quickly kindled and quickly spent."⁴¹ As the help they hoped for did not come, they gave up the fight. Stillman even claimed that the uprising was dying out at the time, and that it was only the Great Powers' Consular Commission of August 1875 that rekindled it, giving the insurgents international encouragement and importance.⁴²

Another reason for the revolt of the Herzegovinian Catholics, apart from the Emperor's visit to Dalmatia, in the opinion of the *Manchester Guardian's* correspondent and future famous archaeologist, Arthur Evans, was the dissatisfaction of the local Franciscans with infringement of some of their privileges and the Sultan's delay in confirming their *fermans*. According to Evans, by pushing their congregation into the revolt, the Franciscans wanted to demonstrate the extent and value of their influence among the "Latin" population.⁴³ He also observed, however, that "many of the Roman Catholics have deserted the national cause", and claimed that the uprising did not really begin until the Orthodox in the Nevesinje district rose up. Moreover, he shared Stillman's view that the real cause of the uprising was not "external agitation", but "the oppression of the tithe-farmers",⁴⁴ arguing that "it is mainly an agrarian war".⁴⁵ To the extreme poverty of the local population and the bad harvest of 1874, he added that the Herzegovinian rebel "simply wanted to obtain a fair share of what he earned with the sweat of his brow, to gain security of life and limb and the honour of his wife and children, to be allowed at least to live".⁴⁶ Both Stillman and Evans harshly criticized the Turcophile attitude of William Holmes and the Foreign Office. Stillman described Holmes's reports as "Arabian Nights",⁴⁷ while Evans's public debate with Holmes continued in the *Manchester Guardian* and Parliament.⁴⁸ However, Stillman and Evans were not essentially opposed to

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 12–14.

⁴³ Evans, *Through Bosnia and Herzegovina*, 337.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 331.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 334.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 336.

⁴⁷ Stillman, *Herzegovina*, 60. In vol. II of his *Autobiography*, 532–533, published almost thirty years later, Stillman claims that Elliot forced Holmes into writing Turkophile reports.

⁴⁸ See A. J. Evans, *Illyrian Letters: A Revised Selection of Correspondence From the Illyrian Provinces of Bosnia, Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Dalmatia, Croatia, and Slavonia, Addressed to the 'Manchester Guardian' During the Year 1877* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1878), 45–49, 84–91.

Britain's official policy in the East. They both believed that the solution lay in an Austro-Hungarian occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina; moreover, Stillman suggested that a "part" of Herzegovina "may be wisely united to Montenegro".⁴⁹

Long after the revolt of the Catholics had reached its peak in June 1875, Taylor reported that in Dubrovnik "all sympathize deeply with the insurgents and, through a local Committee, afford them every help and assistance".⁵⁰ He even claimed that Austria's "local official action with the respect to them [insurgents] is neither neutral, assuring, nor loyal towards the Sultan".⁵¹ Taylor blamed not only Austrian local authorities, but Montenegro as well. Arguing that "their parade of non-intervention seems an absurd fiction", he believed it obvious that considering the strict press laws of both countries neither the *Crnogorac* of Cetinje nor the *Narodni list* and *Nazionale* of Zadar could have been able to publish their belligerent articles about the uprising in Herzegovina without official backing.⁵² Even Holmes noted that Austria was doing nothing to stop the agitation, that "the greatest excitement prevails in Dalmatia and Croatia", and that "the committees have been formed in Agram, Ragusa and Trieste".⁵³

While reports from Dalmatia were going to Vienna, where Percy Ffrench was still in charge of affairs, in the absence of the ambassador, Sir Andrew Buchanan, the reports from the Ottoman Empire were being sent to Constantinople, where ambassador Henry Elliot was struggling to piece together a broader picture. Elliot embraced Holmes's interpretation of the beginning of the uprising, with the refugees returning from Montenegro as instigators of the revolt, and the taxation as its immediate cause.⁵⁴ However, he was sure that Russia, through the Three Emperors' League, was directing the events, using Montenegro as her tool and pushing Austria-Hungary into the Sultan's lands. Safvet Pasha, Ottoman foreign minister, only deepened Elliot's suspicion by stating that the Austrian chargé d'affaires had supported the idea of sending more Ottoman troops to Herzegovina to help crush the revolt, in contrast to the Russian chargé d'affaires, who had remarked that "it would be better not to be precipitate". Elliot also observed

⁴⁹ Stillman, *Herzegovina*, 153; Evans, *Illyrian Letters*, 67–70, 83, 102–103, 246–255.

⁵⁰ NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, Taylor to Elliot, Ragusa, 4 August 1875.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ NA, FO, 1875, 195, vol. 1061, Holmes to Elliot, Bosna Serai, 6 August 1875.

⁵⁴ NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, Elliot to Derby, Therapia, 13 July 1875. According to Evans, *Through Bosnia and Herzegovina*, 338–339, and Stillman, *Herzegovina*, 9–11, some of those refugees, upon returning from Montenegro, were killed by the Turks, which was one of the causes of the revolt.

that the Herzegovinian refugees who started the revolt had been able to return from Montenegro owing to the special concern and help of the Russian embassy in Constantinople.⁵⁵ He advised Safvet Pasha and the Porte not to fear Austria-Hungary or Russia, but to send more troops to Herzegovina and to “adopt such measures as might seem necessary to prevent an extension of the spirit of insubordination”.⁵⁶ In the subsequent weeks, Elliot and Holmes kept on encouraging the Ottomans to send troops “to these semi-barbarous districts” against the rebels who, in Elliot’s words, “carried on an extensive system of plunder and murder, exercising terrorism over the inhabitants of the different villages”.⁵⁷ The insurrection was to be crushed without delay in order to preclude the involvement of the Three Emperors’ League. “That the movement is due to the policy followed by the three northern Powers during the last six months scarcely admits of a reasonable doubt, although it is not to be supposed that Austria intended or desired it to be followed by any such result. Practically, but unconsciously, that Power has been acting as a cat’s-paw to Russia,” Elliot wrote.⁵⁸ Lord Derby approved all steps taken by Elliot.⁵⁹

Elliot’s suspicion that the Three Emperors’ League was secretly encouraging the insurrection was strengthened by the reports of the British diplomats from Paris and Berlin. The French foreign minister, Duc de Decazes, maintained that the Three Emperors’ League was paving the way for an Austrian occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁶⁰ Unlike Elliot, the French official believed that Austria-Hungary was exploiting the events in order to occupy Bosnia and Herzegovina. The president of the Republic, Marshal Mac-Mahon, told the British ambassador, Lord Lyons, that the insurrection occurred at a “very inopportune moment” for “the Western Powers”, France and Britain, and expressed his fear that the members of the League, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia, could “do pretty much as they pleased in the East”. He even suspected that Bismarck’s Germany might take advantage of the reopening of the Eastern Question to settle old scores with France.⁶¹ At the same time, the *chargé d’affaires* in Berlin,

⁵⁵ NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, Elliot to Derby, Therapia, 14 July 1875.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, Elliot to Derby, Therapia, 20 July 1875; see also NA, FO, 1875, 195, vol. 1061, Holmes to Elliot, Bosna Serai, 24 July 1875, 29 July 1875, and 6 August 1875; NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, Elliot to Derby, Therapia, 10 August 1875, 11 August 1875, 17 August 1875 and 18 August 1875.

⁵⁸ NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, Elliot to Derby, Therapia, 14 July 1875.

⁵⁹ NA, FO, 1875, Derby to Elliot, London, 30 July 1875 and 19 August 1875.

⁶⁰ NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, Duc Decazes to Marquis d’Harcourt, Paris, 6 August 1875 (Marquis d’Harcourt’s communication to the Earl of Derby of 7 August 1875).

⁶¹ NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, Lord Lyons to Lord Derby, Paris, 13 August 1875.

Macdonnell, reported that the German secretary of state for foreign affairs, Von Bülow, had told him that in the case of the Sultan's failure to pacify Herzegovina, "the 'entente parfaitement cordiale' which exists between the three Emperors might certainly induce His Imperial Majesty to tender his good offices towards the re-establishment and the maintenance of peace".⁶² On 20th August, Macdonnell sent an even more disturbing telegram: "The Prince [Bismarck] is of opinion that Austrian Government are not acting discreetly. Reports are current of an Austrian armed intervention. The Bourse for the first time has been affected by reports on this account."⁶³

What was the reaction of the decision-makers in London to all those reports and news? Like Mac-Mahon, Disraeli suspected that the three Emperors were preparing the ground to settle the Eastern Question on their own, to the exclusion of Britain. He believed that Russia and the Habsburg Monarchy would try to divide the Sultan's Balkan possessions between them, while Germany would seek to prevent France from restoring her strength. In that way both Britain's prestige and the European balance of power would suffer.⁶⁴

When the insurrection broke out, Disraeli first focused suspicion on Vienna. The first action he took as soon as he heard the news was to telegraph the instructions to the ambassador in Vienna to find out what the "real wishes" of the Austro-Hungarian foreign minister, Count Gyula Andrassy, were. As the reply from Vienna was reassuring, Disraeli concluded that, should Austria-Hungary really remain neutral as Andrassy had promised, the rebellion would be quashed quickly.⁶⁵

Lord Derby too, in the first diary entry concerning the uprising, claimed that "unless the insurgents are backed up by Austria or Russia, or both, there is no serious danger".⁶⁶ By 30th August, Derby still believed that Austria-Hungary was responsible for the outbreak of the revolt.⁶⁷

⁶² NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, Macdonnell to Lord Derby, Berlin, 13 August 1875.

⁶³ NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, Macdonnell to Lord Derby, Berlin, 20 August 1875.

⁶⁴ Disraeli Project, Disraeli to Lady Bradford, Bretby Park, 6 September 1875; *The Letters of Disraeli to Lady Bradford and Lady Chesterfield*, vol. I, ed. The Marquis of Zetland (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1929), 279; W. F. Monypenny and G. E. Buckle, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield*, vol. II (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929), 885; M. Ković, *Disraeli and the Eastern Question* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 89–90.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 87–88.

⁶⁶ 4 August 1875, in *The Diaries of Edward Henry Stanley, 15th Earl of Derby (1826–93). Between September 1869 and March 1878*, ed. J. Vincent (London: Royal Historical Society, 1994), 234.

⁶⁷ 30 August 1875, in *Diaries*, 240; Ković, *Disraeli and the Eastern Question*, 88.

Serbia, in contrast to Austria-Hungary, Montenegro and Russia, was not seen by the British as the instigator of the insurrection. However, from the beginning of August 1875, she was increasingly perceived as yet another tool in the hands of Russia and the Three Emperors' League in the East. On 24th July 1875, the British consul general in Belgrade, William White, was still reporting about the Serbian government's loyal attitude towards the Porte.⁶⁸ However, Prince Milan Obrenović's visit to Vienna gave rise to suspicion. On 3rd August, White passed on the official explanation that the young Prince was travelling "on the private ground", noting that "it has been hinted" that "there is a matrimonial project on foot".⁶⁹ But White also reported that Milan planned to meet the Emperor Franz Joseph and Andrassy, suspecting that the Prince might use "the ultimate special protection of the three military Empires, for defying the authority of the Porte and assuming a hostile attitude".⁷⁰ White pointed to the possibility that Prince Milan, in view of the approaching election, might try to use the events in Herzegovina to revitalize his popularity in response to pressure from Serbian patriotic public opinion. White also reported that one of his ministers "was heard" say that "a little bloodletting would only do good to Servia", and that Prince Nikola was enquiring in Belgrade about Serbia's intentions, and had proposed a joint plan of action.⁷¹

Suspicious about Serbia's connection with the Three Emperors' League, the Foreign Office was trying to gather information in St Petersburg and Vienna as well. Baron Alexander Jomini, an advisor in the Russian foreign ministry, told the British chargé d'affaires, Sir William Doria, that Prince Milan "had gone there solely in search for a wife". However, Doria noticed "a sort of complacency" in the attitude of Jomini and especially of the Austrian ambassador in St Petersburg, Baron Langenau, towards the troubles of the Porte in Herzegovina.⁷² The French ambassador in St Petersburg, General Le Flo, shared Doria's suspicion about the future plans of the Three Emperors' League in the East.⁷³

On the other hand, Percy Ffrench sent calming news from Vienna. According to him, the Serbian Prince was arranging a marriage with "a Roumanian lady".⁷⁴ Apart from that, the young Paris-educated Prince was

⁶⁸ NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, White to Derby, Belgrade, 24 July 1875.

⁶⁹ NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, White to Derby, Belgrade, 3 August 1875.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, Doria to Lord Derby, St Petersburg, 4 August 1875.

⁷³ NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, Doria to Lord Derby, St Petersburg, 9 August 1875.

⁷⁴ NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, Ffrench to Lord Derby, Vienna, 4 August 1875.

looking for “a few days distraction from the monotonous solitude of his life in his own country”. From the perspective of Percy Ffrench, the Prince, in his country of peasants which “possesses neither proprietors nor a middle class”, was “entirely cut off from any civilized intercourse, in hourly dread of assassination”, surrounded only by his ministers and his aides-de-camp, half-civilized themselves. The British diplomat concluded this “Balkanist discourse” with words that now appear strangely ironical and prophetic at the same time: “Yet this is a State which aspires to be the ‘Piedmont’ of the Principalities, which has raised the nucleus of an army destined, according to the Servian creed, to march one day against Turkey and overthrow her, and found and become the head of a Southern Slavonia, which is to absorb all the other Danubian and Austro-Turkish provinces of that race.”⁷⁵

The reports from Belgrade, however, were much more alarming. According to White, only one day after Prince Milan’s departure for Vienna, a committee for Herzegovina was set up openly in Belgrade. The Serbian authorities, which ten days earlier had put a ban on setting up the committee, now did nothing to prevent it. Moreover, White was informed that about one hundred volunteers had left Serbia to join the insurrection in Herzegovina.⁷⁶ Without waiting for either Elliot’s or Derby’s approval, White asked the Serbian foreign minister, Milan Bogićević, for an explanation. Bogićević assured him that Serbian officials were not involved in any way in the despatching of volunteers, “but he admitted departure of a few volunteers”, and confirmed that aid was being raised for the people of Herzegovina.⁷⁷

Within the next few days Serbia indeed became the source of troubling news. In addition to Montenegro and Austria-Hungary, the Porte was now accusing Serbia too of providing help to the rebels in Herzegovina.⁷⁸ According to the news from Constantinople, and even from Paris, as volunteers were pouring in from Dalmatia and Montenegro, Serbia kept sending her volunteers, and the Serbian army was on manoeuvres in the border areas opposite Višegrad.⁷⁹ At the request of the Porte, Lord Derby took official steps to dissuade the governments in Vienna, Cetinje and Belgrade from carrying on with their actions.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, Ffrench to Derby, Vienna, 4 August 1875.

⁷⁶ NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, White to Elliot, Belgrade, 3 August 1875.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, Elliot to Derby, 11 August 1875.

⁷⁹ NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, Elliot to Derby, 11 August 1875; NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, Memorandum communicated to the Earl of Derby by the Marquis d’Harcourt, 15 August 1875.

⁸⁰ NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, Derby to Ffrench, London, 12 August 1875; and Derby to Elliot, London, 12 August 1875.

In reality, both Percy Ffrench and White were well informed about the position of both Prince Milan and the Serbian government. The fact that the cabinet of Danilo Stevanović was indeed secretly raising aid and sending volunteers to Herzegovina led to its conflict with Prince Milan. Upon his return from Vienna, the Prince dismissed the cabinet,⁸¹ but this proved to be an unwise move from the standpoint of his own interests, because the election brought the openly belligerent Liberals to power. White reported that, at the reception for the Consular body held on 22 August 1875, the Prince “required moral support from the foreign Powers for the preservation of peace”.⁸² The Prince said that he had to face the war-minded Assembly, and that he could not obtain support from any man of influence in Serbia with the exception of Jovan Marinović, who favoured negotiations over war, but was not a popular politician.⁸³ The new course of Stevča Mihailović’s government was obvious from the fact that Serbia’s military preparations were now made quite overtly.⁸⁴

That things were getting worse was also clear from White’s report that “the Revolutionary Committee” in Belgrade “held several hundreds natives of Bosnia ready to proceed there” even under the previous Serbian government.⁸⁵ On 18 August 1875, Elliot reported that the Ottoman officials had no information about the insurrection spreading from Herzegovina to Bosnia. Yet, a day later, Buchanan learnt from the Austrian foreign ministry that the insurrection had indeed spread to Bosnia, and that the Habsburg authorities accused Prince Milan of forgetting the promise of neutrality he had made in Vienna.⁸⁶

The scene was now rapidly changing. On the very same day Buchanan informed the Foreign Office about the outbreak of the insurrection in Bosnia (19 August), and the Russian ambassador in Constantinople, Count Ignatiev, proposed to the Porte on behalf of the three Emperors to accept mediation by the Consuls of the Great Powers, who would meet up with the rebel leaders and persuade them to agree to the administrative and tax reforms. This was exactly what the British had feared the most. The Three Emperors’ League was seizing the initiative in the East. Disraeli suspected

⁸¹ NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, White to Derby, Belgrade, 16 August 1875 and 17 August 1875; see Č. Popov, “Srbija u Istočnoj krizi 1875–1878”, in *Istorija srpskog naroda*, vol. V-1, ed. V. Stojančević (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1981), 370; Ekmečić, *Ustanak u Bosni*, 139–140.

⁸² NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, White to Derby, Belgrade, 23 August 1875.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, White to Derby, Belgrade, 17 August 1875.

⁸⁶ NA, FO, 1875, 424, vol. 39, Buchanan to Derby, 19 August 1875.

that it was the beginning of the partitioning of the Ottoman Balkan possessions.⁸⁷ In fact, the Consular Commission was the first clear sign that the Great Powers were openly taking the leading role in the events in the East. Thus, the change of government in Serbia, the spread of the uprising to Bosnia and the setting up of the Consular Commission marked the beginning of a new phase in the course of the Eastern Crisis.

A clear and comprehensive explanation of the causes of such a complex phenomenon as the outbreak of the insurrection in Herzegovina can only be given by analyzing all the relevant sources of different provenance. The British sources tell only part of the story, but the importance of the British perspective became obvious in the continuation of the Eastern Crisis, when Britain snatched the leading role in the events.

The British sources support the conclusion of most historians that the immediate cause of the insurrection was agrarian discontent, especially tithe collecting. Considering "external influences" in the outbreak of the insurrection, the British emphasized the role of Austria-Hungary and Montenegro. They saw behind these countries the shadow of the Three Emperors' League, which was perceived as the main threat to the Ottoman Empire and to British interests in Europe. It was suspected that the uprising might be used as a pretext for dividing the Sultan's European possessions between Austria-Hungary and Russia, in which case Austria-Hungary would enter Bosnia and Herzegovina. Montenegro was seen as a tool of the Three Emperors' League, while Serbia was not perceived as directly involved in the events in Herzegovina. Later on, at the time of Prince Milan's visit to Vienna and with the beginning of the despatching of volunteers from Serbia to Herzegovina, the British diplomats came to think of Serbia as another tool of the Three Emperor's League. As the crisis evolved and Russia's involvement grew deeper and more obvious, the British shifted their suspicion from Vienna to St Petersburg. Nonetheless, the Three Emperors' League remained the main focus of their attention until the end of the Eastern Crisis.

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