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The Great Powers and "the Macedonian question," 1903-1908

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AUTHOR:

Captain Momchil Dimitrov

AY 14-15

Mentor and Oral Defense Committee Member:

Approved:

Date:

Anne Louise Antonoff
[Signature]
3/20/15

Oral Defense Committee Member:

Approved:

Date:

Joseph W. Ryan
[Signature]
3/20/15

Executive Summary

Title: The Great Powers and “the Macedonian question,” 1903-1908

Author: Captain Momchil Dimitrov, Bulgarian Armed Forces

Thesis: The development of the Macedonian question from 1903 to 1908 showed that, despite ostensible public support for a program of reforms designed to alleviate local unrest, the Powers in fact remained more interested in maintaining the balance of power among themselves, at the expense of local Balkan stability. In addition, lack of cooperation from the Ottoman authorities and from Macedonian revolutionary movements, along with the political situation in Turkey in 1908, further precluded possible autonomy or improvement of living conditions in Macedonia. As a result, the Macedonian problem remained unresolved, and was allowed to fester.

Discussion: The Macedonian question did not emerge in 1903 out of nowhere. Indeed, the uprising of that year was not the first to disturb that region of the Ottoman Empire, then known as “Turkey-in-Europe.” During the 1870’s, an anti-Ottoman revolt arose in two sets of Ottoman provinces, or vilayets: Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bulgaria. The situation on the Balkans showed that the Ottoman Empire’s presence on the Balkan Peninsula was weak and dissolution was inevitable. The question about the reforms and the status of the Macedonian vilayets thus had been on the stage of the European policy for many years by the time of the 1903 uprising, and dashed hopes induced desperate measures by the inhabitants. During the Bulgarian Uprising of 1876 and the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-1878, many Bulgarians from Macedonia took part in the armed fight. After the revision of the Treaty of San-Stefano and the decision to restore Macedonia to the Ottoman Empire, re-establishment of the borders of San Stefano became the object of continuous armed struggle by many of those Bulgarians in Macedonia who hadn’t fled to Bulgaria.

Conclusion: After the Congress of Berlin in 1878, the decision to leave Macedonia in the Ottoman Empire and the efforts of the Great Powers to maintain the status quo on the Balkans to achieve their own goals ensured continuous instability in the Macedonian vilayets and on the Balkans. Their unwillingness to provide a better solution, combined with strong national movements in the region, influenced the Macedonian question to evolve from a local issue into a regional and then European problem. The 1903 Ilinden Uprising brought the “Macedonian Question” to the forefront of European diplomacy, but ultimately without lasting results.

The struggle of Great Powers to mitigate the changes in the balance of power destined the first and the last peaceful attempt for peaceful resolution of Macedonian question. The inability of IMRO to reform and to meet the challenges and opportunities offered by the Murzsteg program took out the only option that IMRO had to unite the population with peaceful means instead of armed fight.

Table of Content

DISCLAIMER	5
I. Introduction	6
II. Setting the Stage: The Origins of the Macedonian Question and the Congress of Berlin.....	7
A. The Congress of Berlin.....	8
B. The Great Powers and Macedonia after the Congress of Berlin.....	11
C. The Rise of the Macedonian Revolutionary Organization and the Balkan States	14
D. IMRO and the Great Powers	16
E. Macedonia up to 1903: Preliminary Conclusions	17
III. The Ilinden Uprising and Murzsteg Reform Program.....	18
A. Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization and the Ilinden Uprising	19
B. Murzsteg Reforms and its perception.....	21
C. IMRO and the Reforms	23
IV. Fate of the Reforms	25
A. Early Implementation of the program	25
B. Reforms obstructed.....	27
C. IMRO undergoing internal changes, challenged the reforms.....	32
D. The Great Powers and the financial reform.....	36
V. Changing Great Power Alignments.....	37
A. The Ententes	37
B. Shifting Austria-Hungarian Fortunes.....	39
C. The Young Turk Revolution and its Impact on IMRO.....	41
VI. Conclusion.....	43
Bibliography:.....	55

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I. Introduction

"The Macedonian question" has been a main reason for discord in the Balkans, including the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, WWI, WWII and most recently part of the disintegration of Yugoslavia and ensuing conflicts. The goal of this project is to provide information about the roots of the problem. This task requires understanding a range of viewpoints among the inhabitants and the Great Power participants in the diplomacy of the crises on the Balkan Peninsula. The Macedonian question was about the fate of the population in the Macedonian vilayets who, liberated by Russia in the San Stefano Treaty ending the Russo-Turkish War in 1878, had the chance to enjoy freedom for a few months until the decisions made by the Congress of Berlin to limit the scope of the Russian victory brought them back under the rule of the Ottoman Empire.¹ Until 1902 the Great Powers were focused on maintaining the status quo on the Balkans by means of intervention in the Eastern Question concerning the fate of the Ottoman Empire in Europe. The Powers avoided the Macedonian question and interfered only when the situation escalated and the conflicts threatened to become an issue for the status quo. After the Ilinden Uprising in 1903, forced by strong public opinion and the need to secure their interests, the Great Powers turned their attention again to the Balkans, each of them having its own agenda for the outcome.

The development of the Macedonian question from 1903 to 1908 showed that, despite ostensible public support for a program of reforms designed to alleviate local unrest, the Powers in fact remained more interested in maintaining the balance of power among themselves, at the expense of local Balkan stability. In addition, lack of cooperation from the Ottoman authorities

¹ In referring to Macedonia, one should not mistake the territory in question with the current state of FYROM or the Republic of Macedonia, which constitutes only one third of the geographical region of Macedonia. Rather, the territory comprised the Macedonian vilayets of Kosovo, Salonica and Bitolja as part of the Ottoman Empire in 1903. These regions form the subject of the current research on the "Macedonian question".

and from Macedonian revolutionary movements, along with the political situation in Turkey in 1908, further precluded possible autonomy or improvement of living conditions in Macedonia. As a result, the Macedonian problem remained unresolved, and was allowed to fester. This decision proved short-sighted: The more well-known Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 and subsequent outbreak of the First World War showed that local Balkan instability would come back to haunt the Great Powers. This paper will concentrate on the lesser-known events of 1903-1908, but the full significance of this drama lies in its later implications for world affairs.

II. Setting the Stage: The Origins of the Macedonian Question and the Congress of Berlin

The Macedonian question did not emerge in 1903 out of nowhere. Indeed, the uprising of that year was not the first to disturb that region of the Ottoman Empire, then known as “Turkey-in-Europe.” During the 1870’s, an anti-Ottoman revolt arose in two sets of Ottoman provinces, or vilayets: Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bulgaria. The situation on the Balkans showed that the Ottoman Empire’s presence on the Balkan Peninsula was weak and dissolution was inevitable. Earlier episodes of Balkan nationalism had led to the creation of Greece and Serbia. Since the Treaty of Paris ending the Crimean War in 1856, however, the Great Powers had been supporting the idea of maintaining the integrity of the Ottoman Empire on the Balkans. Events from 1876 on began to cast new doubt on the longevity of Turkey-in-Europe.

Macedonian territory in the late nineteenth century was characterized by extensive ethnical diversity. It included population from all other states, which caused all the neighboring countries, Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria, to see these territories as their own and to establish a policy toward national unification and expansion in these territories. The first step toward this goal

was the creation of the IMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization) in 1893, which through the years gathered support not only in Macedonia, but also in Bulgaria.

A. **The Congress of Berlin**

The desire to obtain control over the Constantinople and the Straits, so as to secure Russian interests in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean and Pan Slav movement were the main factors guiding Russian foreign policy on the Balkans in the 1870s. Statesmen in St. Petersburg felt that “the very key to their house was in hands of a foreigner [Turkey].”¹ Russia believed that the peoples liberated with her help, surrounded by the Ottoman Empire to the South and Austria-Hungarian Empire to the West would logically look for Russia’s guidance and allow St. Petersburg to establish control over the Straits to secure its interests. Both in Russia and on the Balkans, large groups supported Pan Slavism, which was regarded as “one of the most dangerous phenomena of the 1860’s and 1870’s”² in Vienna and London.

In 1876, the Ottomans violently suppressed the uprisings in Bosnia and Bulgaria, but the news about the atrocities were spreading in Europe and offered a chance to Russia to start a war with the Ottoman Empire, without fear of Britain’s involvement on the side of the Sultan.³ With the Reichstadt agreement in 1876 and Treaty of Bucharest in 1877, Russia negotiated with Austria-Hungary an agreement for mutual benevolence and support in case of collective measures against the Ottoman Empire by the Great Powers.⁴ The agreement provided Austria-Hungary with the right to annex Bosnia and Herzegovina, and included stipulations that Vienna would not extend her military power over Bulgaria and Romania, while Russia was not to extend her actions to Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro.⁵ Russia then declared war on Turkey in 1877 that ended with the capitulation of Turkey and the establishment of a Bulgarian state under the terms

of the San Stefano treaty. This “big Bulgaria” included large parts of Macedonia and also access to both the Black Sea and the Aegean Sea.

The creation of such a large state on the Balkans, which might be under Russian influence and would provide Russia an opportunity to pursue further her own goals of obtaining access to the Dardanelles, posed a threat to the interests of the rest of the Great Powers.⁶ Both Great Britain and Austria-Hungary opposed Russia’s sponsorship of the new Balkan state. For Great Britain the Ottoman Empire was important because of the security of her interests in the Middle East and because of the policy of Russia, her “Great Game” rival in Asia, to secure her interests in the Black Sea region and the Turkish Straits, or Dardanelles. For Austria-Hungary the possibility of Russian dominance on the Balkans was very dangerous because of her own aspirations to some of the territories that would provide a route to Aegean Sea port. In addition, the idea of Pan-Slavism on the Balkans was a threat for the Dual Monarchy, which had large numbers of Slav population within her borders. For Germany the important question on the Balkans was to mitigate the risk of war between Russia and Austria-Hungary.⁷

The Berlin Congress, “framed to meet a particular and dangerous situation,”⁸ restored the balance of power on the Balkans and created smaller states which would compete between each other, but none of them would have the power to overwhelm the other. Bulgaria remained a principality under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire. The Congress also left territories on the Balkans under direct Ottoman rule – the Macedonian vilayets, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Crete. One of the clauses stipulated during the Congress of Berlin obliged the Ottoman government to reform the territories with Christian inhabitants so as to provide better conditions for them. However, the weak interest of the Great Powers in controlling the implementation of

this clause, along with the unwillingness of the Ottoman Empire to reform the vilayets, left the population under the same oppression as before the Congress.

In light of the events of 1876-1878, the main concern of Austria-Hungary was that a large “South Slav” state of Serbia or Bulgaria, under the influence of Russia, would very likely end her chance to obtain trading routes to Aegean and Mediterranean ports.⁹ Furthermore, the existence of such a large independent state of Slavs would inspire her own Slav population to raise a national movement.¹⁰ However, any attempt of Austria-Hungary's government to counter Russia on the Balkans in a more decisive way was halted by the awareness that Germany would support Vienna as long as that support did not include deterioration of relations between Germany and Russia.¹¹ For Austria-Hungary “the Ottoman Empire, for all its faults, was the best possible neighbor for the Monarchy.”¹² Russian influence was the main threat for Vienna where officials believed that, as Austrian Foreign Minister in 1903 put it, “A Slav conformation of the Balkan Peninsula under Russian protection would cut our vital arteries”¹³ and that “the moment Russia was to establish herself in Constantinople, Austria becomes ungovernable.”¹⁴ The results of the Berlin Congress and the geographical position of Austria-Hungary gave an advantage to Vienna to influence the Balkan States. Her proximity provided an opportunity to overwhelm commerce with Bulgaria and Serbia which, along with the pro-Austrian inclination of the Bulgarian elite, made the Dual Monarchy the main actor on the Balkans and for Sofia in particular.¹⁵

The policy to preserve the status of the Straits and the fact that the San Stefano Treaty placed “the Porte so much at Russia’s mercy”¹⁶ was one of the main reasons for the interference of Britain after the war in 1878. After the Russian-Turkish war in 1877-1878 and the subsequent Congress of Berlin, London failed to protect the interests of the Sultan and was no longer perceived as a reliable ally of the Ottoman Empire as it used to be.¹⁷ During the 1890’s Britain

lacked any vital interests on the Balkans. Because of both the British choice to remain in diplomatic isolation and the German interest in Ottoman finances and commerce, London lost its position as a protector of the Constantinople.¹⁸

Since the beginning of the crisis on the Balkans in 1875-1878, Bismarck was trying to avoid war between Austria-Hungary and Russia. He used his influence over Vienna and St. Petersburg to negotiate the terms from which both could benefit. He also believed that the Ottoman Empire's integrity was not worth jeopardizing the European balance by a war between the two Great Powers in which "one of the two should be so severely wounded that its position as great powers would be endangered".¹⁹ The Three Emperors' Agreement signed in 1881 pursued the same goal; to preserve the peace between Austria-Hungary and Russia and to help Germany to avoid choosing sides.²⁰

B. The Great Powers and Macedonia after the Congress of Berlin

With the Congress of Berlin, Russia realized that any further attempt at annexation of territories on the Balkans or supporting such aspirations of Bulgaria or Serbia would arouse the hostility of the Great Powers, especially of Britain and Austria-Hungary, Russia therefore decided to implement a more diplomatic approach through negotiations and influence over Bulgaria and other Balkan states where Russia considered herself as the protector of all Slav population.²¹ However, the policy failed exactly where it was supposed to be the strongest, Bulgaria, where Prince Battenberg and his successor, Ferdinand, were leaning toward Austria-Hungary and Germany. The failure to establish control over Bulgaria and the obvious disobedience of that country, which was supposed to be grateful for her liberation, made Russia hostile to Bulgarian aspirations. Russia adopted a new policy to maintain the status quo and to wait for the right moment to establish control over the Straits or at least to secure them against

other Powers. Moreover, as Russia turned to the Far East, the need for the status quo in the West increased. In 1897, Austria-Hungary and Russia signed an agreement for cooperation, including the possible division of the Balkans in spheres of influence between the Powers in the event of Ottoman collapse. Pending that event, they aimed at preservation of the status quo as long as possible. Russia received Habsburg assurances of support for the continued closure of the Black Sea to non-riparian Powers, and for the safety of her Western border.²²

The concern that autonomous Macedonia would join Bulgaria, Serbia or Greece, by choice or by force, made Russian diplomats look for a solution other than autonomy, one that would still guarantee their access to the region. With the improvement of the relations between Bulgaria and Russia after 1894 – though still not, as desired, between master and subordinate, but rather between two sovereign countries Russian statesmen were aware that the Macedonian question was central to the newly established Bulgarian state. They realized that they needed to maintain the hope that the dream of San Stefano could be achieved only with the help of Russia.

An example of Russian policy toward the Balkans is a letter in 1900 from the Russian Consul in Salonica, Viktor Mashkov, to the Russian Ambassador in Constantinople, Ivan Zinoviev, stating that Macedonia needed to be separated between the Balkan States.²³ Otherwise, “Autonomous Macedonia will join Bulgaria at the first possible opportunity, creating Greater Bulgaria, which will become a tool of the West against Russia and one with which we must deal.”²⁴ At the same time, he wrote, Serbia, Romania, Greece and just Bulgaria were balancing each other; consequently, “Our efforts on the Balkans have to focus on not permitting anyone's hegemony but ours - in other words to maintain the balance.”²⁵

The other Powers' policies shifted in accordance with Russia's changing policy. With the Egypt crisis in 1882, when Britain took advantage of an uprising against the Egyptian ruler over British and French financial control, to send troops ashore and begin a long-lasting occupation, France felt endangered, which led to an improvement of French-Russian relations.²⁶ Such relations posed a threat to British naval supremacy but, after analysis of the situation, the British reached the conclusion that the only way to maintain their supremacy in the Mediterranean was "by holding Egypt...and making Alexandria a naval base."²⁷ The British policy of relying on Cairo rather than Constantinople as the basis for control of the Suez Canal, and thus the lifeline to India, was perceived as a withdrawal from the commitment to maintain the status quo on the Balkans. If necessary, Britain could simply close off the Mediterranean at Gibraltar and Suez, rendering any Russian advances at Constantinople pointless from a naval perspective. By the end of the 1880s, Britain had also withdrawn from a commitment to uphold the status quo in the Mediterranean through an entente with France and Italy. This shift sent a signal for Austria-Hungary, which left no other option for Vienna except the eventual 1897 agreement with Russia.²⁸

Because of the current balance of power in Europe, France was limited to influence the events on the Balkans. Nevertheless, France like Britain was interested in the Macedonian question for reasons that included economic interests and public pressure to obtain better conditions for the Christian population. Apart from that, France focused its policy toward the region of Macedonia on preventing further expansion of Austria-German influence. The aim of Paris was to maintain peace and the status quo, as she considered that "any crisis risked bringing about a general conflict."²⁹

C. The Rise of the Macedonian Revolutionary Organization and the Balkan States

The question about the reforms and the status of the Macedonian vilayets thus had been on the stage of the European policy for many years by the time of the 1903 uprising, and dashed hopes induced desperate measures by the inhabitants. During the Bulgarian Uprising of 1876 and the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-1878, many Bulgarians from Macedonia took part in the armed fight. After the revision of the Treaty of San-Stefano and the decision to restore Macedonia to the Ottoman Empire, re-establishment of the borders of San Stefano became the object of continuous armed struggle by many of those Bulgarians in Macedonia who hadn't fled to Bulgaria.³⁰

After initial sporadic outbreaks following the decision of the Congress of Berlin, the activists in Macedonia decided that the newly established Bulgaria would become the center for planning and preparation of the unification of the Bulgarians in Macedonia, who "should look upon the young [Bulgarian] principality as an organ for the whole of the nation."³¹ A good opportunity arose with the creation of the Bulgarian Exarchate that, according to an 1870 law, included all those places where two-thirds of the population had declared itself Bulgarian in a plebiscite, including large portions of Macedonia and Thrace.³² Because of the difference in language much of the population turned away from the Greek Church. In the years preceding the Ilinden Uprising, the Exarchate with its churches and schools became part of the revolutionary struggle for influence over the Macedonian vilayets.

Until 1885 the activities of the Bulgarian movement in Macedonia met almost no resistance and even sympathy from the other Balkan States. The Greeks were occupied with their own cause in Thessaly and Epirus. The Serbs were focused on Bosnia and Herzegovina and Western parts of Bulgaria with further aspiration toward Slav union between Bulgaria and Serbia, where Serbia would take the leading position.³³

This “honeymoon” did not last long. The realization that the Exarchate was more Bulgarian than Slav made some of the Serbian statesmen issue warnings about the Serbian attitude. Pushed by Austria-Hungary, who feared the consolidated influence of Serbia over Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Serbs after 1881 reversed their policy on Bulgaria and the Macedonian question, having won the support of Vienna over possible annexation of the vilayet of Kosovo.³⁴ Blocked by Austria-Hungary to the North and by Albania to the West, Serbia had only one logical option for a seaport, which was on the Aegean Sea through the Macedonian vilayets. The unification of Bulgaria with Eastern Rumelia in 1885 was followed by a Serbian-Bulgarian war in which the Serbs did not receive the expected support from Vienna. Relations between Austria-Hungary and Serbia soon deteriorated, with Serbia more inclined now to Russia, who in turn promised support for Serbia in Macedonia.³⁵ After 1887 the changes in the Bulgarian government brought Stefan Stambulov as prime minister and the policy changed to more friendly relations with Turkey, as Stambulov believed that the Macedonian question could be resolved through diplomacy and cultural and educational influence in Macedonia.³⁶ Relations between Bulgaria and Serbia however remain tense. In 1892 Greece and Serbia initiated talks for possible separation of Macedonia between them which negotiations eventually in 1893 were ceased without result because of the reluctance of the Greeks.³⁷

In 1893, perceiving a growing threat of Serbian and Greek propaganda and disapproving of the soft policy of Stambulov, several Bulgarian Macedonians established at Salonica a secret revolutionary committee, later known as the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization³⁸ (IMRO). The purpose of the group was “to prepare, morally and physically, for a great rising of the Bulgarians against Turkish rule, in the hope of securing self-government.”³⁹ Two years later in Sofia, the revolutionaries established the Supreme Macedonian Committee, which was to

organize support for the movement and for the revolutionary cause in Macedonia and Adrianople. The main purpose of the committees was the full autonomy of Macedonia, with possible later association with Bulgaria. This was to be achieved through establishment of revolutionary committees everywhere in European Turkey. The Supreme Macedonian committee in Sofia was responsible for arming and preparing Macedonians who were in Bulgaria; the Central revolutionary committee in Salonica likewise was responsible for arming and preparing those in Macedonia.⁴⁰

D. IMRO and the Great Powers

All the Balkan countries, especially Serbia and Bulgaria, were receiving periodical reminders that the question of Macedonia would not be resolved soon and that it was a matter of importance for the Great Powers to maintain the stability of the region and the status quo. For Russia the status quo was providing important assurance of the closure of the Black Sea and maintaining the opportunity to seize the Straits, when the conditions would be favorable. For Austria-Hungary the status quo provided the opportunity peacefully to influence Balkan states and to achieve desired route to Aegean Sea port without actual war. One year after the Melnik Uprising in Macedonia of 1895, when Bulgarian bands crossed the border into Macedonia and initiated fights with the Turks, a Bulgarian diplomat in Vienna estimated the situation in the following way: "Bulgaria needs to know that Europe shares the ideas of those two powers [Austria-Hungary and Russia]. France as the ally of Russia will help her anyway. Germany will sign everything decided by Russia and Austria-Hungary. Italy goes with its allies and only Britain follows its own policy, because if the Balkans were on fire, England would still be safe."⁴¹

The revolutionary movement's demands for changing the status quo did not meet with sympathy in Europe. After the agreement with Austria-Hungary in 1897, Russian Foreign

Minister Count Mouraviev declared that “the Macedonian question will be an important factor when we deal with the Eastern Question, but now we need to postpone the solution of Macedonian problems until Russia is able to focus her entire energy on it.”⁴² In 1897 a Bulgarian diplomat in Vienna, Hristo Samyrdjiev, wrote to the Bulgarian Prime Minister Stoilov:

During the meetings I had with Count Goluchowsky I mentioned this idea of the possible establishment of a privileged [autonomous] province. I did not reveal your plan but I asked what kind of reforms the powers consider to be applicable in Macedonia. I also told him that it is necessary to hurry with those reforms in order to preserve the peace in the region. The Count answered me that until the end of the Greek-Turkish and Crete questions there are no possible options for the powers to work on the reforms [in Macedonia]. However, when the time to consider those reforms comes, the Powers will use all their efforts not to get themselves again in the same situation of reformation "only on paper." In addition the Count said that this question is now postponed as there are more important matters...⁴³

Similarly, the Bulgarian minister in Vienna described in a letter from 1898 a conversation with Count Goluchowsky about the Macedonian question:

As in Rome here in Vienna we are again advised to be careful about this matter and to avoid supporting any revolutionary movement in Macedonia. Otherwise all the responsibility will fall on us. The Count told me that he gave the same warning to Belgrade and he knows that the Russian government gave same warning to Sofia and Belgrade. "The Peace and status quo are desired by the Powers and will be maintained at any cost", until the condition change to more favorable.⁴⁴

These and other letters from this period clearly showed the determination of Great Powers, especially of Austria-Hungary and Russia, to hold onto the status quo on the Balkans and not to allow the disturbances in the region to drag them once more into crisis as they did in 1876. This was especially true for Russia who considered that her interests were better protected by the status quo than with a war, as in 1878 and the subsequent decisions of the Congress of Berlin.⁴⁵

E. Macedonia up to 1903: Preliminary Conclusions

The Macedonian question, during and after the Congress of Berlin, remained unresolved for several reasons. First, to partition Bulgaria was to avoid expansion of Russian influence over

the Balkans, which would eventually lead to accomplishment of Russia's agenda to control the Straits and Constantinople. The three vilayets of Macedonia – Kosovo, Monastir and Salonica – were the natural way from Europe to the Middle East, and the Power that controlled this region would have great leverage over the entire Balkan Peninsula. Even Bismarck, who disliked the Balkan question, admitted that “those who control the valley of the River Vardar are the masters of the Balkans.”⁴⁶ The second reason was that the Great Powers wanted the Ottoman Empire to retain territories in Europe, so that they had grounds for interference with the policy of the Ottoman Empire. The third was the fear that an independent or autonomous state of Macedonia would join or be absorbed by some of the neighboring Balkan states, which would create an imbalance of power and therefore conflict in the region. The situation after 1885 became worse for the Ottoman Empire with the loss of Eastern Rumelia to the newly formed Bulgarian principality; like Macedonia, Eastern Rumelia was close to Constantinople.

The integrity of the Ottoman Empire provided the Great Powers with the necessary peace and balance between them. So it was easier to postpone the Macedonian question by simply avoiding it. Serious measures taken by any power from the European Concert to provide better conditions for the population in Macedonia could also be considered by the others as an attempt to establish conditions for eventual influence over, or even control of, Macedonia. The Great Powers reserved for themselves the right to interfere within the Ottoman Empire whenever a crisis was arising; Article XXIII of the Berlin Treaty specifically gave the signatory Powers the right to intervene in Ottoman governance over Macedonia.

III. The Ilinden Uprising and Murzsteg Reform Program

In the beginning of the twentieth century the situation in Macedonia was getting more and more complicated with many armed bands from Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria active in the

territory, which caused Lord Lansdowne to send a warning to Sofia and Constantinople to cease their support for the revolutionary committees.⁴⁷ After the Armenian Crisis of 1895-1896 and the Crete Crisis of 1897-1899 the Great Powers realized that the Macedonian question was even more complex and difficult to resolve than previous crises in the Ottoman Empire. The ethnic mixture of the region and new revolutionary spirit meant that they could not apply a simple solution from the past.

A. Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization and the Ilinden Uprising

Judging from the correspondence in 1902, IMRO had a good understanding of the situation in Europe and the challenges to their cause, along with the constraints and possible assistance of other states. Two of the leaders, Gotse Delchev and George Petrov wrote in June:

During the last years the vanity of our hopes in the Christian charity of Christian Europe, in the pro-Slav sympathy of Slav Russia and in the fraternity of brotherly Bulgaria became obvious. It became clear that mighty Christian Europe is holding with her power the sick Turkey in the name of European interests, that great Slav Russia use her greatness for the purposes of the Sultan in the name of her [Russian] conquests, and that weak Bulgaria cannot fight back her hostile neighbors. And then we saw, that if we want and need to hope for something, then we have to rely only on us, on our will and strength.⁴⁸

As the date of the eventual uprising approached, the members of IMRO saw how their ideals and beliefs were fading. Bulgaria, which was supposed to provide the assistance and asylum, was affected by the pressure of Great Powers. Russia, who considered herself as the defender of Slav populations on the Balkans, was having her own problem in the Far East and had made clear that will not tolerate any challenges to status quo. At that point the only hope for IMRO was, even with the cost of eventual retaliation from the Ottomans, to initiate an Uprising that would force Europe to act, as IMRO initially believed, in their favor.

The Ilinden Uprising, which began in August 1903, had to include all of the Christian population in the Macedonian vilayets if it were to be successful. However, the uprising included only small parts of the vilayets and was soon suppressed by the Ottomans. The Revolutionary committees expected help from the Bulgarian Army, but the reaction of the Great Powers and the warning to Bulgaria “that Bulgaria won’t be supported if threatened by the anger of Turkey”⁴⁹ suppressed any attempt by Sofia to interfere.⁵⁰ In answer to an inquiry from IMRO for assistance, the Bulgarian Minister of War answered that “the army in current situation will be unable to help.”⁵¹

Even before the uprising, there were elements in IMRO who thought that they were not ready yet for an Uprising, but the circumstances and rumors amongst the local population forced IMRO to initiate the rebellion earlier than planned. Faced with defeat in the fight, IMRO confronted the challenge of other problems concerning tactics, organizational structure and leadership. IMRO had to decide whether to continue the fight by the old means or to re-examine its purpose and to carry out reforms in its organizational structure and policy.⁵² Since its foundation in 1893, IMRO had been aware that it was not very likely to succeed against the Ottomans alone. In his notes, one of the leaders of IMRO, Hristo Matov, wrote in 1903 that the purpose was “not to defeat Turkey, but not to let Turkey to defeat us.”⁵³ The goal of the uprising was at least twofold: First, to send a message to the Great Powers that the population of Macedonia would not comply with the status quo; second, to challenge Europe to take actions for better living conditions for the Christian population in the three vilayets of Macedonia.

The members of IMRO believed that, however big the uprising might be, if the Europeans did not interfere, the Ottomans would suppress the revolutionary committees and the struggle would be unsuccessful. Having resolved to cause the European powers to interfere, IMRO sent a

declaration to the Great Powers once the Ilinden Uprising broke out, explaining the reasons for the unrest and their terms for stopping the fight.⁵⁴

Many of the members of IMRO did not believe that the Great Powers would interfere just to protect the population. The events from the last quarter century had showed that the Powers had their own interests, and that those interests were more important than the well-being of the population in Macedonia. However, IMRO relied on public support to exercise pressure over the European governments to take action and to stop the violence.

After the Ilinden Uprising and subsequent bloody reprisals, the differences amongst the leadership of IMRO became apparent. Two different groups with entirely different opinions on how to continue their fight emerged. The first group, called “moderate” or “right wing” by historians, was pro-Bulgarian and sought the liberation and autonomy of Macedonia only with the help of Bulgaria, with eventual unification as the only option.⁵⁵ Many of them received education in Bulgaria and consequently served in Bulgarian Army. The left-wing or “Seres group”, which shared the socialists’ political views, requested decentralization and democratization of the organization and were against any entanglement of IMRO with Bulgaria or any other Balkan state. Their leader, Sandansky, envisioned “Macedonia for Macedonians” and the outcome for Macedonia as an autonomous province but within Turkey. With the failure of Ilinden and the inability of Bulgaria to assist in the armed fight, the left wing grew stronger, declaring that the real enemy was the propaganda spread by the Balkan states, Bulgaria in particular.⁵⁶

B. Murzsteg Reforms and its perception

The Great Powers strongly opposed any revolutionary activity and did not approve of the actions taken by IMRO and other bands in Macedonia. The Russian and Austrian governments

were concerned with the role of Sofia in the Ilinden Uprising. As the Austrian Foreign Minister wrote, "It is obvious that the agitation among Bulgarians living in Macedonia vilayets took on a character of real insurrection."⁵⁷ After the Ilinden Uprising and the news of Turkish reprisals in Macedonia spreading across the European capitals, the British Foreign Secretary announced,

"The time had come for the stronger measures which he had from the first reserved the freedom to propose. Turkey should be informed that the February program was the minimum, that its execution was lamentably inadequate, and that far more prompt and more effective measures were needed. The Powers should join in this representation; and if Bulgaria was told that such actions were being taken, this might calm her."⁵⁸

This also marked another step of the shift of British foreign policy away from their diplomatic isolation, demanding broader actions by the Powers and also notifying Austria-Hungary and Russia that Britain was interested in Balkans and the resolve of Macedonian question as much as they were. In addition, Britain was looking for options to bring back Russia from its entanglement in Far East, where London saw a threat to its own interests.

Looking for cooperative actions with Russia on Macedonian reform in 1902 and 1903, Austria-Hungary hoped that through this cooperation she would receive the consent of St. Petersburg for the projected annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁵⁹ The mistrust of England and France about the intentions of Austria-Hungary and Russia aroused suspicions that the alignment of Vienna and St. Petersburg in Macedonian reform was actually a plan to divide the Balkans in spheres of influence. This led to further pressure in 1904 and 1905 by both France and Britain to take a more active role in the reforms. During the Russo-Japanese war (1904-1905), France and England considered that Austria-Hungary could use the absence and the weakness of Russia at that time, and took a more active stance to prevent Vienna from gaining more influence in Macedonia.⁶⁰

The revision in February 1903 of Britain's policy in the Middle East further confirmed that the Straits and Constantinople were no longer as important as earlier and that the Straits status could be negotiated with Russia in exchange for an agreement over Central Asia.⁶¹ In London a new „radical tradition” policy was adopted toward the Eastern Question, based on reliance on dynamic movements in Balkan states instead of the "sick man of Europe," the Ottoman Empire. In January 1903, Lord Lansdowne, Foreign Secretary of Britain made the Austrian Ambassador in London aware that Britain considered the Vienna plan for reforms in Macedonia not successful so far and that although Austria-Hungary and Russia were the most interested in the question, the reforms were of importance for Britain too.⁶²

On September 24, 1903 Austria-Hungary and Russia, under growing pressure from France and England, announced new plan of reforms, which was named for the place where it was signed – Murzsteg. The Murzsteg program provided the desired involvement of other Great Powers while it reserved major roles for Russia and Austria-Hungary. Almost two months later on November 25, 1903, under the pressure of Austrian and Russian ambassador in Constantinople, the Sultan accepted the program.⁶³

C. IMRO and the Reforms

The Murzsteg program was welcomed by the public in Europe, but the opinions in the Balkans were different. IMRO was disappointed by the program, the refusal of the Powers to consider their demands and the helpless situation of the population in Macedonia. For them the program was an attempt to avoid the problems and to postpone the Macedonian question, and they concluded that “everything will finish with the reforms proposed by Russia and Austria, which although extensive, are a cruel joke for the Bulgarian population in Macedonia and Adrianople.”⁶⁴

In Turkey and Macedonia, the program was perceived “as interference by Russia and Austria in internal affairs”.⁶⁵ The Christians felt the program as “a hand put on Macedonia by two empires which reserve the right to adjust alone the local destinies...”⁶⁶ The news of reforms in favor of the Christians met with dissatisfaction by Muslims (Turks and Albanians) in Macedonia. According to Zinoviev, “the very notion of equality with Christians was completely alien to the worldview of the Turks, who have for centuries considered themselves a privileged race,”⁶⁷ and, Zinoviev believed that the Turks “taking advantage of the patronage of the administration, tried in every way to exploit the Christians that they fear and hate.”⁶⁸ In March 1904, Albanians from Kosovo vilayet sent a resolution to the Turkish government opposing the reforms and the interference of the European powers, especially the establishment of Russian officials in the vilayets.⁶⁹

Initially IMRO decided not to oppose the reforms and to cease the armed struggle, until the reforms proved by themselves that the program was not working and was unable to provide better conditions for the population. In two pages sent to regional leaders of the organization in Macedonia and Adrianople in February 1904, Internal Organization presented instructions for complaints to be filed by the population with the Civil Agents of Russia and Austria.⁷⁰ Those complaints included: misrule of gendarmerie, troops and police; unlawful actions and lack of justice; unlawful actions of financial department, etc. The aim was that the population would present similar complaints, which would assure the Civil Agents of their desperate situation. At the end of the letter Damyan Gruev wrote:

The IO will not accept or overthrow the reforms. The Organization ignores them; they do not provide hope to any of our demands. The reforms cannot improve the situation in Macedonia and Adrianople; they are fake and insincere, which will fail as they failed previously. It is our duty to accelerate their discredit. The interested powers, Austria and Russia, do not want improvements. They came up

with the last plan for reforms not with any desire to help, but just to postpone the decision of the question. In order to prove and reveal their insincerity, let the population appear to them with these demands and complaints. Remarks: Do not allow leak of information that this is coming from the IO.⁷¹

IMRO considered the implementation of the Murzsteg reforms to be far from their initial purpose of initiating the Uprising and getting the attention of the Great Powers. Their expectation of larger involvement of European Powers and possible autonomous status along with the frustration that their demands were not taken into consideration set their attitude towards reform from the beginning: to give the reforms program the chance to fail. With a strongly diminished position and weaker support from the local population, IMRO had no other option but to wait for the population to look for them again when the reforms proved to be ineffective.

In 1905, frustrated with the slow tempo of the reforms and dissatisfied with what had been carried out so far, IMRO in Salonica, which was part of the left wing of the organization declared, that although IMRO was cooperating with the Civil Agents, nothing was achieved by the reforms and will cease their support and relations with the representatives of the European powers. Instructing the local population to ignore the Agents and to carry their complaints directly to the consuls, IMRO also warned that it would reprimand those who obstructed the reformation of Macedonia.⁷²

IV. Fate of the Reforms

A. Early Implementation of the program

Despite being the greatest supporter of the idea that the solution for the Macedonian question was autonomy, Lord Lansdowne was aware that any immediate attempt at division of the Ottoman Empire would be perceived as a threat by the Turks and could lead to war on the Balkans⁷³. However, in February 1904 Lord Lansdowne instructed British Ambassadors to try to

convince other Great Powers that if the reforms were to fail, there would be only two options: “Macedonia might be either joined to Bulgaria, or given an autonomous status.”⁷⁴ The answers showed that France would remain neutral, while Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia were hostile to such a course.⁷⁵ However, in February 1905, both the Austrian and Russian Ambassadors in Bucharest assured British Ambassador that the steady progress of the reforms was intended to provide for the autonomy of Macedonia.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, in April, Romania warned the British Ambassador of possible war on the Balkans and that “the autonomy of Macedonia would be disastrous for Romania, because it would be inevitably result in the annexation by Bulgaria of Macedonian territory.”⁷⁷ However, later in 1905, after the flaws of ongoing reform in Macedonia had become obvious, Lord Lansdowne prepared far more decisive measures to speed the reforms in financial and judicial sector and to grant eventual autonomous status for Macedonia. Meanwhile, both Turkey and Bulgaria were increasing their military preparations for possible conflict which could benefit Britain, making Russia to focus on Balkans instead in Middle East.⁷⁸

The attitude of Russia had changed from sympathy and protective behavior to open hostility against any attempt of Bulgaria or any other Balkan state to annex part or all of Macedonia. The Russian policy toward the Balkans and Macedonian question was to keep the status quo until circumstances improved. When the time was right, Russia would continue with her expansion policy for control over the Straits. The continuing interest of Bulgaria in supporting revolutionary movements in Macedonia made Russia look at Bulgaria as a “threat to stability in the Balkans, to Russia’s status quo agreement of 1897 with Austria-Hungary, and to the safety of the Straits.”⁷⁹

The weaknesses of the reform program made a deepening crisis in the Ottoman Empire appear likely, whether through Bulgarian war with Turkey or through greater pressure from Britain. At the end of 1904, Goluchowsky decided that, in the event of the partition of Turkey, Austria-Hungary had to make sure that Serbia would not gain territory or ability to influence neighboring Slav population. Vienna also worked for the creation of Great Albania as “a strong wall against Serbia.”⁸⁰ The case of Great Bulgaria was to be well accepted and in accordance with Vienna’s interests⁸¹, where “a good relationship [with Bulgaria] would always be preferable to one with Serbia, who has been intriguing incessantly against the Monarchy.”⁸²

In 1904-1905, France’s large interest in the finances of the Ottoman Empire led it to persevere in support of the reforms carried out by Russia and Austria-Hungary, as long as those reforms served to maintain the status quo and the safety of French investments in Ottoman banks.⁸³ During the period of the reforms Germany did not support or oppose the efforts of the Powers, benefiting from the position of protector of the Ottoman Empire sharing also mutual interest with France in Turkish finances.⁸⁴ When the French historian Ernest Lavisse wrote about the policy of France, he described it as “to avoid sentimental consideration, but should stick to her traditional Near Eastern policy...which is to prevent, or at least to postpone as long as possible a dismemberment [of the Empire] in which several powers would get their share and in which France could not find hers.”⁸⁵

B. Reforms obstructed

The actual introduction of the program started in the beginning of 1904 with the establishment of the international administration alongside the existing Turkish one. Although the program was accepted by the Ottoman Government, the Sultan continued to bargain over every detail of its establishment, arguing about the application of the program and obstructing

every step of the reforms and trying to limit the intervention of the Great Powers.⁸⁶ Turkey curtailed the freedom of movement for the Civil Agents that the program initially granted. The Sultan appointed Turkish officials, which he claimed had the purpose “of assuring their personal security and facilitating their relations...”⁸⁷ The Ottoman Government knew now that the villagers would be hesitant when presenting their complaints to the Civil Agents, realizing that the information they presented would also be available to the Ottoman authorities and that retaliation against the local population would be likely.

Although the Civil Agents had the desire to fulfil their duties, their access to information and to villages was limited and filtered by the Inspector General and Ottoman authorities. However, they managed to raise funds to help refugees settling back in Macedonia. These funds were supposed to be used to rebuild the destroyed houses. Nevertheless, this fact was not recognized by the French consuls, who claimed that the Christians continued to live in temporary shelters, unable to work also on their land.⁸⁸

The French consul Louis Steeg had observed that the role of the Civil Agents was diminished to advisors to Hilmi Pasha, and that there was no obligation for him to follow their advices.⁸⁹ He still admitted that they were able to exercise at least moral control over the Inspector General and the reforms. One of the critics of the reforms was the Russian Consul in Salonica, Giers, who in 1904 was appointed as a Civil Agent. Giers wrote in one of his reports to St. Petersburg that he regarded the work as “impracticable and inconsistent with our significant interests in the Balkans.” As he observed, “We have entered a new and thorny way for us to streamline and strengthen the administration of the Turkish Ottoman rule over Christian areas, the path which hitherto we thoroughly repudiated.”⁹⁰ Giers saw the only solution of the Macedonian question as “recognition of the existence of the Bulgarian national movement in

Macedonia, led by the Supreme Committee,” and "direct assistance to the hopes of the Bulgarians in the range specified by us and profitable for Russia."⁹¹ Many diplomats, being away from their capitals, had a better understanding of the local situation than their colleagues back home. That tendency led to the phenomenon of some of those diplomats defending a point of view different from the official policy. In this case, however, as his expressed position contradicted Russian foreign policy, Giers was soon relieved from the position of Civil Agent.

The other part of the reforms, the forming of the gendarmerie, was delegated to military representatives from the Great Powers. The process of decision making was very complicated and built again on compromise between the military commission, the Ambassadors of Russia and Austria-Hungary, and the Sultan.⁹² Again, too, although acting in cooperation the Great Powers had differing views on how to run the reforms and in which regions. This was especially true of Austria-Hungary. Germany refused altogether to participate actively in the reforms, considering that otherwise it would lose good relations with the Sultan.⁹³

The interest of Austria-Hungary to realize in practice some of the reforms was dictated by the desire to influence the provinces inhabited by Albanians⁹⁴ or at least to exclude them from the reform plan out of fear that Italy could increase her influence in this region, given its proximity to Italy, and prevent Austria-Hungary from settling on the Aegean Sea. The Austrians had been devoting effort since 1896 to encouraging the development of Albanian nationalism as a barrier against Slavdom.⁹⁵ Article III of the reforms, which after its introduction led to mutual massacres, was designed by Goluchowsky with the exact purpose of consolidating the areas populated by Albanians.⁹⁶ During the reforms, Italy and Austria-Hungary remained rivals under the surface of their alliance. The reason was the interest of Italy in the Albanian provinces, which threatened that of Austria-Hungary.

The next step of the military commission, convened to decide the role and responsibilities of the officers appointed to reform the gendarmerie, was again the subject of debates and tension between the Powers and the Porte.⁹⁷ The Porte objected to such authority being given to foreign Powers as a sign of “distrust in the expertise of the Ottoman officers.”⁹⁸ With the mediation of German diplomats, the talks continued. Further changes and more specific details as to the role of the officers eventually compromised the initial purpose of the reformation of the gendarmerie. The result was a decrease in the number of officers in the vilayets and limits on their powers to interfere in the process of reforming the gendarmerie, which further hindered any improvements in Macedonia.⁹⁹

Even during the cooperation in Macedonia, the Sultan used the rivalry between the Great Powers to preserve the relative independence of his administration and military forces. As Nadine Lange-Akhund concludes, “The crisis in Macedonia was used by the Great Powers to reinforce their interests, rather than to improve the living conditions of the Christians.”¹⁰⁰ The Powers’ behavior only provided further opportunity for the Ottoman officials to continue governing the provinces on their terms. This pattern resulted in large waves of immigration to neighboring countries, to other European States and to the United States. More than 15,000 Bulgarians fled from Macedonia from 1904 to 1906, and according to some sources, more than 200,000 by 1911.¹⁰¹

The different nationalities in the region further obstructed the job of the officers in the vilayets. Some of the officers, like the French Captain Falconetti¹⁰² in Seres, regarded Bulgarians as supportive of the reforms, but Greeks as hostile to them and therefore inclined to cooperate more with Turkish authorities than with the representatives of the Great Powers. In another region, the vilayet of Kosovo, the French consul¹⁰³ noticed open hostility toward the arrival of

Austria-Hungarian officers on the part of the entire population – Serbs, Bulgarians and Muslims. The hostility was especially strong among the Muslim part of the population who perceived the presence of the Christian foreign officers “like a plague from God.”¹⁰⁴ In the vilayets of Skopje, French diplomats were suspicious that the goal of Austria-Hungary in the region was not just the reforms but to “prepare an ulterior occupation of these vilayets” and to “increase the influence of Vienna in the region.”¹⁰⁵ This behavior of the Austrian-Hungarian officers was dictated by the requirement to limit the influence of Serbia in the region where a large part of the population was Serb, and to avoid the scenario of “Great Serbia”¹⁰⁶ that was the aim of Serbian propaganda in the region.

Although committed to fulfill their job, Russian officers who were sent to reorganize the gendarmerie in Macedonia admitted the ineffectiveness of the reforms. In 1907, Captain Voronin in his report to General Shostak wrote that “the population of Macedonia has not believed in the reforms; three years passed and they see no difference. The court is still slow and unjust. The army and the Turkish authorities are still doing what they want.”¹⁰⁷

During the reorganization one of the first things the European officers attempted was to dismiss from the gendarmerie those who were incapable of fulfilling their duties.¹⁰⁸ However, because of the lack of direct authority to appoint or dismiss personnel, all the proposals made by the European officers became entangled in the Turkish administration, which further slowed the process. During their mandate, the European officers managed at least to reorganize the structure of the gendarmerie in more flexible and modern units. In many reports sent to their respective governments, they explained the obstructions they had met. The report from the Civil Agents in 1904 said, “The reforms find however an obstacle in the passive resistance of the Turkish Government.”¹⁰⁹ In 1906 they reported that “the commission notes with regret the continual

opposition shown by the Ottoman officials, civilian and military, to the application of the reforms.”¹¹⁰

In addition to the setbacks mentioned above, Article III of the Murzsteg reforms was falsely perceived by the Greek, Serbian and Bulgarian revolutionary movements as meaning that Macedonia would be partitioned eventually into regions based on ethnicity. This misperception led to ethnic cleansing and enforced conversion of the population,¹¹¹ In October 1907, an Austria-Russian Note supported by the other Great Powers made the Balkan states aware about this misinterpretation of Article III.¹¹² The same issue was also one of the reasons for the division between the left and right wings of IMRO, where one of the leaders of the right wing, Boris Sarafov, opposed such forced conversions carried out by Sandansky’s left wing. In 1907, in accordance with his policy of diminishing the Bulgarian contribution to the revolutionary committees, Sandansky ordered the assassination of Sarafov and Garvanov, both prominent members of the Sofia committee.¹¹³

C. IMRO undergoing internal changes, challenged the reforms

In 1905 the Murzsteg program, obstructed at every step by the Ottoman Government and lacking stronger support from the European Powers, was still not very successful except partially so, in the reorganization of the gendarmerie. The situation was observed by IMRO. One of the right wing leaders, Boris Sarafov, wrote in February 1905¹¹⁴ that the Macedonian question was at a critical stage and that the current behavior of Turkey was obstructing the reforms and “created a dilemma which Europe could solve only through decisive initiative.”¹¹⁵ He tried also to raise awareness that allegedly “most dangerous is Austria, which for a very long time has followed a policy of conquest toward Macedonia and is relying on the failure of the reforms to initiate an occupation.”¹¹⁶ He also recognized, just as Russian and British diplomats did, that “the only

counter to Austria and other conquerors are the other Great Powers, and because of that we need to focus our propaganda in those countries, enlightening the public over there.”¹¹⁷ Before his murder Sarafov was one of the main “faces” of IMRO in Europe, travelling through the capitals and gathering support while trying to justify to Europeans IMRO’s cause.

In August 1905 during the Congress of IMRO in Salonica, members of the left wing of IMRO made an observation about some positive changes as a result of the reforms and that the international status of Macedonian question was well accepted in Europe.¹¹⁸ They noticed that the governments now had their own programs and opinions of the reform in Macedonia. The idea of the autonomy of Macedonia was slowly growing, but all of them noted that it was still too early to discuss this more seriously.¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, another observation made during the Congress began to consider how best to achieve that goal: “We have to stop looking to revolution as the only meaning; we need to prepare the population to act as free people. The towns, not the villages need to become our centers.”¹²⁰ Further the Congress declared that “We have very strong faith in the international finance reform. It is possible that finally something could be successful and the taxes could be spent properly.”¹²¹ However, this statement was soon undermined by the strong resistance of the Ottoman government against the financial reform, which caused Great Britain and other Powers to use a demonstration of naval power to coerce the Sultan to accept the financial reform.

By 1905 IMRO was diminished and heavily weakened because of the suppression during the Ilinden Uprising as well as the period of inactivity and the internal quarrels that arose in the interim. In order to restore its position as a revolutionary organization representing the grievances of the people, IMRO in attempt of a consolidation, drew closer to the committee in Sofia and implemented changes in its structure and purposes, no longer limited to just the revolutionary

fight, but also with a vision of what Macedonia would need once autonomy was obtained. During the Rila Congress in September and October 1905, the left wing of IMRO prevailed and announced changes in IMRO's charter concerning new members, who were now to include "all the unsatisfied elements in Macedonia and Adrianople, without regard for difference of ethnicity," and concerning the objective, which became "to fight for full political autonomy for these two regions."¹²² Along with revolutionary activities and the preparation for renewed armed struggle, the Internal Organization made decisions to strive for the cultural and economic prosperity of the population and the legal struggle against Turkish authority. The members of the Congress declared:

Considering our cause and our purpose we say that the [Murzsteg] program does not satisfy our demands and those of our people. Without interfering or obstructing the Agent's business, the Organization will continue to follow its pure revolutionary way, but the population will bring their complaints from now on not to the Agents but to the Consuls as it used to be before the arrival of the Agents. One injustice of this program [Murszteg] is that Adrianople region is excluded. Adrianople has always been an integral part of the Organization and requires the same liberation as Macedonia.¹²³

The Internal Organization was looking now not just for small attacks on the Ottomans but also to the importance of educating the population and developing a vision how to build a nation. Still considering the revolution as their main tool, they became aware that only a nation-wide general Uprising could bring that liberation and that if they did not help themselves, eventually no one would do so.

Therefore IMRO became actively involved in disseminating more information amongst the European capitals about its cause and about the Macedonian question. A significant difference was that the correspondence in the beginning of the twentieth century included mainly questions about finances and minor questions, whereas later after 1905, the members of IMRO started

paying more attention not just to the revolutionary cause but also to the question of how to link it with the European Powers' policies, and to the relationships between the decisions made by the Great Powers and their interests. Another protocol from the Rila Congress in August 1905 discussed the foreign policy of IMRO and declared, "It would be naïve to believe that the European Powers intervened because of a desire to stop the cruelties in Macedonia."¹²⁴ What IMRO believed was that the European Powers acted only in hopes of possible profit or interest, and in the current situation they were acting in this way because revolutionary movements threatened their investments in the Ottoman Empire. IMRO further declared, "In order to prevent such a scenario of change from one slavery to another, the Organization needs to fight back the European policy of economic conquest."¹²⁵

One of the conclusions made about the reforms and the path of IMRO was decided by the Bitola Committee in September 1907.¹²⁶ A protocol from their meeting stated:

During the last few years some reasons diverted the Organization from its path and caused it to devote its energy to a fight against foreign [Balkan states] nationalists' propaganda, a fight that, if continued, will jeopardize our cause and cause the Organization to follow the same nationalists' propaganda pattern. It is also well known that, after the proclamation of the reforms, the Organization declared that it would stop its activities against the Turkish government, not because we believed in the reforms, but to prove that these reforms would not bring anything positive if the Turkish regime continued to exist. By doing nothing we sacrificed our revolutionary cause, but we proved that we know Turkey better. Now when we have confirmed the truth we cannot continue our inactivity. We will start again our journey. And we stress the decision that our congress made to initiate the activities of the Organization again. We have the unanimity to act decisively. All we need now is new energy and enthusiasm.¹²⁷

This development of IMRO's understanding of their cause showed their tendency to radicalization and the influence of socialist ideas that were spreading in Europe. Looking for support from Europe in 1903 with the Ilinden Uprising, IMRO fell in its own trap by putting too much hope in the reforms. In addition, the period of inactivity eroded their support and the

confidence of the population they had engaged. Further deterioration between the left wing and the Bulgarian Macedonian committee combined with the official policy of the Bulgarian government not to support openly the revolutionary cause diminished IMRO's option to accumulate funds and the refuge they had earlier enjoyed in Bulgaria.

D. The Great Powers and the financial reform

The next step that the Great Powers took after the slow tempo of reforms had become obvious was to push the Ottoman Government for financial reform,¹²⁸ which was immediately rejected by the Sultan. Further exchange of notes from May to October 1905 brought the proposal of Lord Lansdowne to appoint financial experts to the Civil Agents already in Macedonia. The Sultan's decision to ignore the proposals united the Great Powers to proceed to take a firmer tone. The next note sent by the Powers in November 1905 demanded "the Ottoman government's immediate approval, of a two year extension of the reform program, the reorganization of the gendarmerie, the recognition of the four financial delegates, and the acceptance of the actions of the International Financial Commission for the three vilayets of Macedonia."¹²⁹ The Powers resolved to coerce the Sultan by means of joint naval force. This decision for forceful action marked a new direction in European policy toward the Macedonian Question, where Britain took the most active stance towards resolving the problem of Macedonia.

The subsequent naval demonstration on November 27, 1905 in the Dardanelles Straits, conducted by all the Great Powers except Germany, persuaded the Sultan to follow the measures proposed by the Powers¹³⁰ with still some concessions in custom taxes made in favor of Turkey and favorable also for Germany. The financial reform was considered a victory of British diplomacy, during which Britain received support mainly from Russian Ambassador. Russia's

cooperation was in accord with Russian policy to engage the Powers more actively in the reforms and, in the wake of defeat by Japan in the 1904-1905 war, to improve relations with Britain.¹³¹

V. Changing Great Power Alignments

A. The Ententes

The rapprochement between France and England in 1904 was seen by Russia as treason, because of the Russian-French agreement from 1894. However, a weakened Russia preoccupied on the one hand with war with Japan and on the other with internal reforms, was not enough guarantees for France and her fears of war with Germany. France was not interested in Russia's involvement in Far East or in Asia. For Paris, Russia needed to be present and strong in Europe to be able to keep the balance of power, disrupted during the Russian Far East adventure.¹³²

One of the purposes of Russian foreign policy in 1906 after the war with Japan became preservation of the alliance with France as a guarantee for peace in Europe. The peace was required for difficult ongoing internal political and financial reforms in Russia during the period. Moreover, to avoid any further loss of power Russia needed agreement with Britain over old disputes, including normalization of the relations with Japan and agreement over the Balkans and Asia.¹³³

The agreement and improvement of Anglo-Russian relations, although both countries had different agendas, were important for Russia for several reasons. Russia needed stabilization of the situation in Asia, and one of the ways to achieve this was an agreement over the region with Britain. However, Russia was trying to avoid a closer alliance like the one with France because of the danger of getting involved in the Anglo-German naval race and antagonism. In 1905, the Russo-Japanese war and internal political problems in Russia weakened Russia in military,

financial and political aspects.¹³⁴ The balance of power in Europe had changed in favor of the Austria-German alliance. The financial dependence of Russia after Russo-Japanese war had increased, but to resolve this problem, Russia needed peaceful Europe. Meantime the conflict between Germany and France was intensifying because of the Morocco diplomatic crisis, in which Germany opposed the unilateral expansion of French control of the hitherto independent Sultanate.¹³⁵ France was the main creditor of Russia and there were no other options for St. Petersburg. Neither Germany nor Britain was willing to give Russia a loan. Furthermore, the process of lending was part of the foreign policy of the Powers, directly tied with certain political conditions and requirements. Russia therefore had few options for a bold, independent policy.

The new Foreign Minister of Russia, Izvolsky in 1906 concluded that “It is now of high importance to secure Russia's interests from Europe to the Far East. In that regard, the most important method becomes an agreement with Britain to minimize the danger that is coming and to provide Russia with time to recover her strength.”¹³⁶ The agreement with Britain and France in 1907 sent the message that Russia was back on her feet and back to her interests in Europe, and more specifically on the Balkans. The agreement was based on the mutual interests of Russia and Britain in Persia, Afghanistan, and Tibet, where they agreed not to interfere with each other's area of influence, meanwhile also preserving the region from any external third party's interference (though Russia excluded Germany from that list). After the agreement between Russia and Britain in 1907 the political struggle between the Great Powers had changed, affecting the balance with Austria-Hungary and Germany. After formation of the entente from 1904 between Britain and France, Berlin was afraid that increased British influence over Russia would lead to an anti-German coalition, which made Izvolsky consider each step vis-à-vis Britain and to

make sure that Russia did not give cause for closer relations with Britain to be perceived as deterioration of the relations with Germany.¹³⁷

B. Shifting Austria-Hungarian Fortunes

In early 1907, Austria-Hungary tried to convince Russia to join an agreement over a division of spheres of influence in the Balkans between Germany, Austria-Hungary and France where London perceived that effort as an attempt to isolate Britain.¹³⁸ Austria's actual motivation was fear that Britain was driving too radical a policy in Europe toward the Macedonian Question, and that this policy would destabilize the region¹³⁹. However, Russia refused to join such a bloc, which did not serve her interest; moreover, St. Petersburg was very suspicious of Vienna's intentions.¹⁴⁰ Instead, Russia, sharing at that time common goals with Britain, preferred to secure her interests in the Middle East with London. Russia and Britain started consultations and cooperation over the required reforms on the Balkans.

Furthermore, in 1907, Izvolsky was promoting the idea of greater involvement of the other European Powers in the case of the judicial reforms in Macedonia. The change in policy promoted by the Russian Foreign Minister was seen in Vienna as an attempt to change the initial agreement between Russia and Austria-Hungary and as a threat to Habsburg interests on the Balkans.¹⁴¹ However, the Austria-Hungary entente with Russia was still alive and Sir Grey noticed in January 1907 that the Russian and Austrian Representatives had voted against the changes in the powers of the financial commission.¹⁴²

The major topic of Austria-Hungarian policy in 1907-1908 became secret preparations for the forthcoming annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which because of the Young Turks revolution and fears of reforms in the region was launched in a hurry. The hostility of Serbia

made Aehrenthal to consider the annexation which would end the aspirations of Belgrade for new territories and the possible Slav movement arising in her own territories.¹⁴³

The crisis in the relations between Russia and Austria-Hungary became obvious when in January 1908 the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Austria-Hungary declared an agreement with the Turkish government for a concession to build a railway from Bosnia and Herzegovina through Novi Pazar and Macedonia to Salonica.¹⁴⁴ The importance of the project was seen as an expansion of Austrian-German policy and as a threat to Russian interests. Britain and Russia saw in the concession the consent of Austria-Hungary to withdraw or delay the reforms in Macedonia, playing a double game with the Sultan at the expense of the reforms.¹⁴⁵

Another example from the diplomatic records showed that sometimes the ambassadors possessed better judgment about the local situation than their own governments.¹⁴⁶ In February 1908, one day after the approval of Novi Pazar railway, all the Ambassadors at Constantinople refused to present to the Porte the judicial reform scheme, prepared by the British government, justifying their actions with the belief that the current format will not be accepted by the Turks.¹⁴⁷ Furthermore in an interview from March 21, 1908, Prince Bulow explained that “Germany had no intention of impeding reform in the Balkans. The German Ambassador at Constantinople had certainly suggested amendments in the proposed Judicial reforms in Macedonia; but these were improvements, and they had been unanimously accepted by the other Ambassadors. Germany supported the principle of unanimity.”¹⁴⁸

For Sir Grey the postponement of Judicial reform was a signal that the Powers wanted to abandon all the progress of the reforms. While Britain was doing everything to press the reforms, “other members of the Concert curry favor with the Porte by obstructing them.”¹⁴⁹ Further, in

March 1908 in a letter to British Ambassador in Vienna, Sir Grey showed open hostility towards Vienna blaming Austria for obstructing the entire process of the reforms, while following its own agenda to secure Austrian interests with the Porte.¹⁵⁰ However, it was Austria-Hungary who in 1907 had made attempts to get closer with Britain but with no success.¹⁵¹

Izvol'sky saw two dangerous factors that could lead to general war in Europe – the instability in the Balkans and the antagonism between France and Germany. What he considered that Russia could help to avoid was a conflict on the Balkans. As for Germany, he believed, “If Germany wants war we can't do anything about it.”¹⁵² On February 3, 1908 Russian Ministry Council discussed the suggestion of Izvol'sky for military intervention on the Balkans, but the conclusion was that in the current moment the Russians were incapable of carrying such an operation and the only option for Russia to secure her interests was through diplomacy.¹⁵³ Discontented by Austria-Hungary, Russia entered into closer cooperation with Britain, both being determined to push the Sultan harder for the reforms in Macedonia. The program developed into an exchange of notes between the Great Powers from January to June.¹⁵⁴ By the time the program was ready, the Young Turks had initiated their coup and soon the reforms were abandoned. On July 25, 1908, Izvol'sky published the note with the official position, that the Russian government was terminating its participation in Macedonian reforms and in future would avoid interference in the policy of the new Turkish government.¹⁵⁵

C. The Young Turk Revolution and its Impact on IMRO

Germany was not alone in its fears of dire consequences from a radical reform agenda in the Macedonia Question. The improved cooperation of Britain and Russia after the meeting at Reval, together with the pressure they exerted on the Ottoman government to put the Macedonian reforms into action, raised the fears of the Young Turks that the reforms would eventually lead to

autonomy of the provinces and another loss of territory for the disintegrating Ottoman Empire.¹⁵⁶ The threat led the Young Turks to accelerate their plan for regime change and re-establishment of the Constitution, which had been suspended in 1878, and thereby to diminish possible intervention of the Great Powers in Macedonia.

In July 1908, after the proclamation of the Young Turk revolution and the restoration of the Constitution, the left wing of IMRO under Sandansky decided to support the Young Turks, hoping that the much-desired change for the population in Macedonia could be realized on a legal basis.¹⁵⁷ In the same month, Izvolsky finally sent to the other European Powers a note announcing the program that was prepared by Russian and British diplomats, yet at the same time suggesting that, in view of the events in Turkey, the European powers should limit interference and let the Young Turks prove that they were able to carry out the reforms they promised. He also reserved the right of Russia and other Great Powers to observe the reforms and to interfere again if the reforms were not implemented.¹⁵⁸ However, the new regime of the Young Turks was friendly toward Britain,¹⁵⁹ and therefore the changed relationship between them brought also the end of British policy to implement reforms. In September 1908, a report by A. Shopov to General Paprikov noted that Russian officers along with other European officers were given unlimited leave and would vacate the area.¹⁶⁰

The revolution of the Young Turks put the European powers in a situation where to continue with the reforms was no longer suitable. The most prominent defender of the reforms, Britain, now had taken the position of allowing the Young Turks to rebuild Constitutional Turkey and to reform the Empire, including Macedonia. In August 1908, Sir Nicolson, Ambassador in St. Petersburg, wrote to Sir Edward Grey that, “in view of the new situation in Turkey it is better to suspend any further action for the present...waiting for the future developments of events.”¹⁶¹

The situation allegedly showed signs of improvement and as Halim Pasha said on September 19, 1908: “After the proclamation of the Constitution all the bands put their weapons down and now we have peace. Within this Constitutional regime, as the European officers admitted there is no longer need of Civil Agents and officers.”¹⁶²

The belief that the Young Turk revolution would bring the reforms in Macedonia was soon diminished. The results from the elections carried out in 1908 were protested by most of the Christian population in the Macedonian vilayets, and the parties established by IMRO were not given the chance to elect their representatives in new government.¹⁶³ In October 1908, Hristo Matov shared his concerns in letter to Noel Buxton, chairman of the pro-Bulgarian British “Balkan Committee,” noting his suspicions that nothing had changed in the administration and observing that the Christian population was still oppressed.¹⁶⁴

The annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Austria-Hungary and the proclamation of independence of Bulgaria in September 1908 raised fears and suspicions amongst the Young Turks that Turkey could be divided further and their authority diminished by these events.¹⁶⁵ Soon the old policy of suppression was implemented again and parties established by Christians declared illegal.¹⁶⁶ Soon the previous organization of IMRO was established again, but this time weakened by its exposure as a political party and by the limited support of the local population.

VI. Conclusion

After the Congress of Berlin in 1878, the decision to leave Macedonia in the Ottoman Empire and the efforts of the Great Powers to maintain the status quo on the Balkans to achieve their own goals ensured continuous instability in the Macedonian vilayets and on the Balkans. Their unwillingness to provide a better solution, combined with strong national movements in the

region, influenced the Macedonian question to evolve from a local issue into a regional and then European problem. The 1903 Ilinden Uprising brought the “Macedonian Question” to the forefront of European diplomacy, but ultimately without lasting results.

In 1903, with Great Britain undergoing transformation in her foreign policy, Russia busy in her Far East, Austria-Hungary and Germany still supporting the status quo and France somewhere in the middle, the Powers were unable to agree on more decisive and cooperative actions than the ineffective Murzsteg Reforms. They once more postponed the inevitable partition of the Ottoman Empire, meanwhile trying to mitigate the risk with the reforms in the region. In addition, for the Ottoman Empire the prospect of losing Macedonia was very dangerous and the Sultan was very determined to keep Macedonia even with force.¹⁶⁷ The latter stance was recognized by most of the Great Powers as possibly triggering a Balkan war if the reforms were to threaten the integrity of the Ottoman Empire, which allowed the Sultan to obscure the program without much objection or pressure from the Powers. British pressure to persevere with radical reforms despite the danger of war merely raised European suspicions that Britain sought to create trouble for its own ends. Although the Great Powers decided to act as a concert when implementing the reforms in Macedonia, they still had their own views on how to implement those reforms. Moreover, with differing views of the desired end, they found it difficult to agree on a common approach to the reforms themselves. Austria-Hungary and Russia were the main actors but they still had to consult and respect other Great Powers on the matter of reforms in Macedonia. Even when Britain displaced Austria as Russia’s Near Eastern partner, the reform program still constituted just a compromise between the Great Powers, a choice between intervention for the sake of Macedonian welfare and restraint for the sake of Great Power interests.¹⁶⁸

In the period of 1905 - 1907, with the renewed interest of Russia in European politics following the defeat by Japan, Britain's persistence for more decisive reforms and ongoing changes in European alliances led the Great Powers to intervene in a more decisive way and to implement some of the late reforms. However, the Young Turk revolution in 1908 and the ensuing Bosnian crisis discontinued the chance of the Great Powers to end the Macedonian question. The new regime and the new crisis occupied everyone's attention.

Finally, IMRO itself played a major part in the turn of events. The weakened IMRO factions after 1903 failed to find common ground on which to work together for better development of the Macedonian question. Instead of joining efforts and using the best opportunities that the Murzsteg reforms could offer, they continued the fight between each other and against other armed bands in Macedonia, thus crippling their organization and repelling the population by their violence. Despite many setbacks, the Murzsteg program offered options to IMRO to improve conditions for the population in Macedonia, which they failed to grab. The changes of Bulgarian policy, due to attempts to improve relations with Turkey and the Great Powers, along with the danger of conflict on the Balkans, dashed any hopes of IMRO for assistance from the Bulgarian military, which provoked even deeper tension amongst the members of IMRO.

The struggle of the Great Powers to mitigate the changes in the balance of power determined the fate of the first and the last peaceful attempt for peaceful resolution of the Macedonian question. The inability of IMRO to reform and to meet the challenges and opportunities offered by the Murzsteg program removed the only option that IMRO had to unite the population with peaceful means instead of armed fight.

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¹⁶⁴ Archives State Agency. Volume 28. *Christo Matov's archives. (Towards the history of cultural, educational and revolutionary fights of Bulgarians born in Macedonian and Thracian lands, in the end of 19th c. and the beginning of 20th c. Records collection)*, (Sofia, 2004), Държавна Агенция „Архиви“. *Архив на Христо Матов. (Към историята на културно-просветните и революционните борби на македонските и тракийските българи, в края на 19 в. и началото на 20 в.)* Документален сборник. София, България. 2004. 289.

¹⁶⁵ Aarbakke. *Ethnic Rivalry*, 150.

¹⁶⁶ Aarbakke. *Ethnic Rivalry*, 151.

¹⁶⁷ Lange-Akhund, *The Macedonian Question*, 67.

¹⁶⁸ Lange-Akhund, *The Macedonian Question*, 146.

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