

The Young Turk Revolution and Austria-Hungary¹

ROMAN KODET

The crisis caused by the Austro-Hungarian project of the Sanjak railway faded away during spring 1908. Austria-Hungary therefore tried again to activate its policy in Istanbul and to improve its reputation in the East. It could use the fact that a lot of opened problems remained there, which the Great Powers tried to solve. The complicated Macedonian question was still unsolved so the Foreign Minister of Austria-Hungary Alois Lexa von Aehrenthal could entertain his old scheme of the cooperation with Russia. Therefore he tried to press the Turks to undertake conservative reforms in Macedonia. This effort aimed to counter British radical reform proposals supported by Petersburg, which in the same time strived to push through their own railroad project of Transversal railway, which in their eyes should create a counterweight the Sanjak railway.² Vienna could also use the fact that the Russo-British cooperation was weakened by the fact that both countries were not able to find an agreement in the case of judicial reform in Macedonia.³ It even seemed for a short time that Russia could return to the entente with Austria-Hungary badly shattered by the Sanjak crisis.⁴ However, in June 1908 the Tsar Nicholas II met Edward VII in Reval (today's Tallinn) and both countries were able to unify their stance to the Eastern question.⁵ Aehrenthal's hopes that the Russo-British cooperation would be weakened by their differences were not fulfilled. Further development in the policy of the Great Powers in Macedonia came nevertheless to a standstill after the break out of the Young Turk revolution.

The political situation in Istanbul was quite calm during summer 1908. One of the most important events in this period was the death of

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² Pallavicini to Aehrenthal 9. 3. 1908, Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv (henceforth HHStA), Politisches Archiv (henceforth PA), XII Türkei, Kt. 346, Liasse XXXXVI-1, Balkanbahnen III-XII.

³ B. MOLDEN, *Graf Aehrenthal*, Stuttgart, Berlin 1917, p. 37.

⁴ These hopes were aroused by a sensational speech of Russian Foreign Minister Izvolsky in front of the Duma on the 17th April 1908. The Minister said that he didn't agree with the British proposals in Macedonia and announced that he was not opposed to the entente with Austria-Hungary. HHStA, Nachlass Berchtold (henceforth NL/Be), Kt. 1, Typskript Memoiren Berchtolds, Bd. I., p. 126.

⁵ Kiderlen to Bülow 18. 6. 1908, *Die Grosse Politik der Europäischen Kabinette 1871-1914* (henceforth GP), J. LEPSIUS, A. MENDELSSOHN-BARTHOLDY, F. THIMME (Hrsg.), Bd. 25, Berlin 1927, p. 468.

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British ambassador sir Nicholas O'Connor on the 19th March 1908.⁶ Although Austro-Hungarian ambassador to the Port Margrave Johann Pallavicini disagreed with British policy and was in an opposition to O'Connor especially in the question of Macedonian reforms, the death of O'Connor shattered him greatly. In his report to Vienna he wrote that despite different opinions he had had the best relationship with O'Connor of all his colleagues in Istanbul.⁷ Pallavicini wasn't able to create such a relationship with O'Connor's successor sir Gerard August Lowther. The change on the post of the British ambassador in Istanbul collided by chance with the important transformation in the Ottoman diplomatic corps, during which were replaced the ambassadors in London and Rome.⁸ Except of these events the situation in Istanbul was still, but this state was only an illusion.

The opposition against the regime of Sultan Abdülhamid II manifested not only by the national unrests in Armenia or Macedonia, but was evident even among the Turks. Those, who took part in the establishment, started even to criticize the current state of affairs. According to them, the main problem did not lay in the foreign, economic, national or religious policy, but in the manner of the rule of the empire, which was deeply influenced by the personality of the sovereign. The historians emphasize especially Abdülhamid's secretive and paranoid character:⁹ *"His fear reached grotesque dimensions. Specialized eunuchs had to taste not only Sultans food but also cigarettes to make sure they were not poisoned. It was forbidden to play Hamlet in the theaters, because it depicted a murder of the sovereign. The Sultan also allegedly suspected any novelties – for example he didn't allow to use electric energy for private reasons, because electricity was produced by the dynamo which reminded him dynamite. The use of telephone was also forbidden. A huge spying apparatus was built and the Sultan studied its reports carefully. Exiles, murder by strangling or drowning in the Bosphorus were common methods of elimination of the opponents in Constantinople... The words such as constitution, parliament revolution or unrest were forbidden to be used in the press."*¹⁰ Although it is undisputable that during Abdülhamid's reign the Ottoman Empire went through the impressive development and modernization, his rule was more similar to despotism than to the political system of the

⁶ Pallavicini to Aehrenthal 19. 3. 1908, HHStA, PA, XII Türkei, Kt. 194, Berichte.

⁷ Pallavicini to Aehrenthal 26. 3. 1908, HHStA, PA, XII Türkei, Kt. 194, Berichte.

⁸ Pallavicini to Aehrenthal 1. 4. 1908, HHStA, PA, XII Türkei, Kt. 194, Berichte.

⁹ The roots of these character attributes influencing Sultans policy can be traced to the 80s of the 19th century. See J. HASLIP, *Der Sultan. Das Leben Abd ul-Hamids II.*, München 1968, pp. 143ff.

¹⁰ E. GOMBÁR, *Moderní dějiny Islámských zemí*, Praha 1999, pp. 274ff.

European states, although Abdülhamid himself “*came to the throne promising to support constitutionalism*”.¹¹ The absolutistic form of government and the sovereigns distrust to his surroundings were strengthened not only by his own experiences from the time of his accession to the throne,¹² but also by current events – assassination attempts against politicians and even the heads of states in Europe and America.¹³ During his reign he challenged several conspiracies, which only increased his paranoia.¹⁴

If the functioning of the state and its institutions during the Hamidian era is analyzed, it must be observed that despite its modernization efforts it was a backward step when it is compared with the Tanzimat era, which preceded it. While during Tanzimat the loyalty of the civil service and the armed forces belong at least nominally to the state, Abdülhamid II observed a policy of promoting only those people to the high state posts who were personally dependent on him. “*The Sultan viewed loyalty as an indispensable qualification for employment in the civil service*”, the representatives of bureaucracy and army were therefore personally responsible to the ruler without being controlled by other institution.¹⁵ The center of power laid in the palace, where the Privy Council and other institutions controlled by the Sultan administered the affairs of the state.¹⁶ Those suspected of liberal thoughts were controlled by secret police and thus with dubious loyalty were relieved from their posts, forced to go to exile or even executed. As an exemplary case served the fate of Midhat Paşa – creator of the first Ottoman constitution – who after his return from exile at the end of 1878 hold the office of the governor of Syria, but in 1881 was imprisoned and died three years later in Yemen.¹⁷ Since the end of the

¹¹ S. J. SHAW, E. K. SHAW, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey. Vol. II: Reform, Revolution and Republic: The Rise of Modern Turkey, 1808–1975*, London, New York, Melbourne 1977, p. 211.

¹² Ibidem, p. 212.

¹³ C. V. FINDLEY, *Turkey, Islam, Nationalism and Modernity. A History, 1789–2007*, New Haven, London 2010, p. 147.

¹⁴ For example in January 1908 the traditional ceremonies of kissing the Sultans hand were moved from the traditional place in palace Dolmabahçe to Yıldız, because there were rumours of possible plot against the sovereign, who felt much safer in his own residence than in the huge building of Dolmabahçe, which reminded him the unhappy destiny of his uncle – Sultan Abdülaziz. Pallavicini to Aehrenthal 15. 1. 1908, HHStA, PA, XII Türkei, Kt. 194, Berichte.

¹⁵ M. Ş. HANİOĞLU, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, Princeton, Oxford 2008, p. 125.

¹⁶ SHAW, SHAW, pp. 213ff.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 216.

80s of the 19th century the Sultan relied increasingly on a narrow circle of the men whom he appointed to important state offices.¹⁸

An opposition started to form in the 90s of the 19th century against this form of government. The leaders of the Ottoman emigration in Paris founded a Committee of Union and Progress (Ittihat ve Terakki Cemijeti) with Ahmed Riza in its lead. The domestic illegal organization Ottoman Freedom Society whose members were young officers of the Ottoman army in Thessalonica came into connection with the formation known as the Young Turks (Les Jeunes Turcs) in France.¹⁹ Given the fact that a lot of these men were members of Freemasonry lodges, their influence in the units of the Ottoman army stationed in Macedonia started to spread with considerable speed.²⁰ There was the growing chaos in Macedonia, which the Great Powers were not able to solve; these young soldiers who were afraid of the collapse of the Ottoman rule in Europe called for an installment of such a regime which would be able to bring order.

The situation in Macedonia was quite tense during the spring of 1908. Two important factors contributed to the final escalation. A rumor spread at the beginning of summer 1908 that the Sultan who watched the situation in Thessalonica carefully was preparing a purge in the army to get it rid of the unreliable elements.²¹ The news about the meeting of the Tsar with Edward VII in Reval also gave the Young Turks an impression that both sovereigns could make a secret pact which would solve the Macedonian question in a way that would mean the end of the Ottoman rule in Europe. This speculation created an atmosphere of uneasiness among the Young Turks.²² The Young Turks also conspicuously followed the policy of Vienna, which tried to renovate its entente with Russia and to pressure on the Porte in the case of the Macedonian reforms.²³ These all facts prompted the Young Turks to take decisive action.

¹⁸ Ibidem, pp. 218ff.

¹⁹ HANİOĞLU, pp. 145ff., compare with GOMBÁR, pp. 291ff.

²⁰ M. MAZOWER, *Salonica, City of Ghosts. Christians, Muslims and Jews, 1430–1950*, New York 2006, pp. 255ff.

²¹ HANİOĞLU, p. 149.

²² Ibidem, pp. 148ff.

²³ One of the most interesting episodes of the negotiation between Austria-Hungary and Russia in June and July 1908 was a memorandum of the Russian Foreign Minister Izvolsky from the 2nd July in which he outlined his idea of further development of the Macedonian question and the whole situation on the Balkans. Izvolsky mentioned here that he was prepared to observe positive policy towards the Austro-Hungarian interests on the Balkans if Vienna supported Russian interests in the Straits. Memorandum of the Russian Foreign Minister 2. 7. 1908, *Österreich-Ungarns Aussenpolitik von der bosnischen Krise 1908 bis zum Kriegsausbruch 1914. Diplomatische Aktenstücke des österreichisch-ungarischen Ministeriums des Äusseren* (henceforth ÖUA), Ausge-

On the 3rd July 1908 Major Ahmed Niyazi Bey deserted with his troops and started an armed struggle against the government in Istanbul. His main demand was the renewal of the constitution of 1876. Sultans effort to suppress the insurrection which gained widespread support in the army failed after the murder of one of his aide-de-camps Şemsi Paşa tasked by the crushing of the rebels by the Young Turk officers in Monastir.²⁴ In the second half of July 1908 the insurgents gained enough power and support to start planning a march against Istanbul itself. Although the Sultan tried to prevent such development by igniting a conflict with the Bulgars,²⁵ the fall of his regime was inevitable. In an effort to save as much as possible from his position, the Sultan decided to take the situation into his own hands and on 23rd July issued an irradé restoring the constitution. One day later he announced an amnesty for the political prisoners and dissolved his feared secret police.²⁶ The power of the palace was therefore broken in considerably short period and the power in the state was taken over by the representatives of the Young Turks who were almost unknown by the representatives of the Great Powers.²⁷

The reaction of the Great Powers on the situation in Macedonia was at first quite mild. The British representatives in Istanbul were even refused to negotiate with the Young Turk envoys who tried to gain British support at the beginning of July 1908.²⁸ Even the strongest power in Istanbul – Germany – underestimated the situation in Macedonia. Its ambassador Adolf Marschall von Bieberstein was at a vacation and was temporarily stood in by Kiderlen-Wächter, who described the Young Turks as people who on the basis of their superficial knowledge of the European institutions wanted to reform the empire on the basis of parliamentarism. He underestimated their capabilities when he claimed that the movement was not very numerous and he therefore didn't consider it as dangerous.²⁹ Vienna was also disquieted by the situation. Aehrenthal was especially surprised by the lack of action on the part of the Sultan. According to Pallavicini's reports there was an atmosphere of confusion and helplessness in the Yıldız palace, which escalated with the spreading of the Young

wählt von L. BITTNER, A. F. PRIBRAM, H. SRBIK et. al., Bd. 1, Wien, Leipzig 1930, pp. 9–11.

²⁴ SHAW, SHAW, pp. 266ff.

²⁵ HANİOĞLU, p. 149.

²⁶ GOMBÁR, p. 295, compare with SHAW, SHAW, p. 267.

²⁷ F. R. BRIDGE, *Die jungtürkische Revolution aus österreichisch-ungarischer Sicht*, in: Österreichische Osthefte 38, Hf. 1, Wien 1996, p. 26.

²⁸ S. McMEEKIN, *The Berlin-Baghdad Express. The Ottoman Empire and Germany's Bid for World Power 1898–1918*, London, New York, Toronto 2011, p. 69.

²⁹ Kiderlen to the German Foreign office, 10. 7. 1908, GP, Bd. 25, p. 557.

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Turk movement.³⁰ Vienna was however only able to watch the situation and wait further developments. After the collapse of the Hamidian regime Pallavicini could only claim that “*Europe stands in front of totally new situation*”, and that he couldn’t estimate the consequences of the latest events. According to him the Sultans regime was much weaker than it seemed and in his situation Abdülhamid had no choice except of the accepting the Young Turk demands.³¹ The Germans assessed the situation similarly and too late realized how much was their strong position in Istanbul dependent on the person of the Sultan.³² Kiderlen-Wächter could only observe how the center of power was transferred from the sovereign to the Grand Vizier and with some anxiety added that the Young Turk movement wouldn’t be satisfied with the restoration of the constitution.³³

Aehrenthal viewed the Young Turk revolution and the renewal of the constitution as potentially dangerous development, which could according to him endanger Austro-Hungarian interests in the sphere of the Eastern question. The Austro-Hungarian minister had in mind especially the unresolved question of Bosnia and Herzegovina.³⁴ The situation of both occupied provinces which were nominally under the Ottoman rule was so precarious that it required resolute action to clarify their position. There was a menace that if the new Young Turk government proclaimed elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the position of Austria-Hungary in the provinces could collapse. Aehrenthal was also concerned by the fact that the unrest in the European part of Turkey could provoke Serbia and Bulgaria to declare war on the Ottoman Empire, which would considerably complicate the Balkan policy. He therefore proposed the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina at the beginning of August 1908. In such case he planned to simultaneously withdraw Austro-Hungarian garrisons from the Sanjak of Novi Pazar.³⁵ However, a step of such importance couldn’t be made without proper diplomatic preparations.

Aehrenthal spoke about the current situation in Istanbul with counselor of the German embassy in Vienna Count Brockdorff-Rantzau. During their talks Aehrenthal advocated a principle of nonintervention into the inner policy of the Ottoman Empire and demonstrated his preparedness to

³⁰ Pallavicini to Aehrenthal, 8. and 14. 7. 1908, HHStA, PA, XII Türkei, Kt. 195, Berichte.

³¹ Pallavicini to Aehrenthal, 24. 7. 1908, HHStA, PA, XII Türkei, Kt. 195, Berichte.

³² McMEEKIN, p. 69.

³³ Kiderlen to Bülow, 27. 7. 1908, GP, Bd. 25, p. 572.

³⁴ A copy of Aehrenthals letter to Pallavicini, 4. 8. 1908, HHStA, PA, XII Türkei, Kt. 195, Berichte.

³⁵ Aehrenthal to Beck, 7. 8. 1908, ÖUA, Bd. 1, pp. 23–25.

cooperate not only with Germany but also with Russia.³⁶ Although the Germans verbally agreed with this concept, their policy in Istanbul concentrated on maintain their own interests.³⁷ Aehrenthals effort to establish a cooperation of three “conservative” powers therefore failed. After Aehrenthal realized the menace to the Austro-Hungarian position in the occupied provinces he decided to concentrate primarily on this question. The main obstacle to the proposed annexation could be resistance of Russia, which Aehrenthal had to gain on his side by negotiations with Russian Foreign minister Izvolsky. He planned to use the ongoing negotiations with Petersburg about the situation in Macedonia.³⁸ As a base of these talks Aehrenthal wanted to use indirect Izvolskys offers from 2nd July 1908 in which the Russian minister hinted that Russia could accept the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the case of Austro-Hungarian support of the Russian aspirations in the Straits.³⁹

Izvolsky came with similar proposal already at the end of the year 1907 and came with it at the beginning of summer 1908, because the result of the Reval meeting filled him with optimism with regard to the stance of London. The deal with Austria-Hungary should, according to him, open a path to historical success for which he was ready to sacrifice some of the Russian interests on the Balkans.⁴⁰ Although Aehrenthal declined these probes with the explanation that the “*question of the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is only matter of Austria-Hungary*”,⁴¹ the Young Turk revolution changed his opinion, because in Aehrenthal’s eyes the changed condition made the annexation absolutely necessary. Izvolskys hints were therefore a base for further negotiations. At the beginning of August 1908 Aehrenthal was prepared to use this opportunity to clarify the position of Bosnia and Herzegovina. An occasion to directly negotiate with Izvolsky came at the end of summer when the Russian minister planned to visit Carlsbad. Aehrenthal therefore instructed Austro-Hungarian ambassador in Petersburg Count Leopold Berchtold to invite Izvolsky to his castle Buchlau where both ministers would be able to discuss the situation in

³⁶ Brockdorff-Rantzau to the German Foreign office, 27. 7. 1908, GP, Bd. 25, p. 574.

³⁷ After the initial surprise Berlin tried to maintain cautious policy. They accepted the new regime and even announced that they consider this change as necessary. Schoens memorandum, 29. 7. 1908, GP, Bd. 25, pp. 580–581.

³⁸ Nearer see Aehrenthal to Berchtold, 24. 7. 1908, ÖUA, Bd. 1, pp. 15ff.

³⁹ Memorandum of the Russian Foreign Minister, 2. 7. 1908, ÖUA, Bd. 1, pp. 9–11.

⁴⁰ W. M. CARLGREN, *Iswolsky und Aehrenthal vor der Bosnischen Annexionskrise*, Uppsala 1955, p. 314.

⁴¹ A. SKŘIVAN, *Císařská politika. Rakousko-Uhersko a Německo v evropské politice v letech 1906–1914*, Praha 1996, p. 48.

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private.⁴² It seemed therefore that the Young Turk revolution brought Austria-Hungary an opportunity to renew entente with Russia and to push through its interests on the Balkans. However, the reality should have been different than Aehrenthal planned.

Abstract

The Young Turk revolution changed considerably the position of the Great Powers in Istanbul. The unexpected turmoil in the Ottoman Empire caused considerable anxiety in the European capitals – especially in Vienna. From the point of view of Austria-Hungary it imperiled the occupation of the provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Habsburg government. The change of the regime therefore compelled the foreign minister Alois Lexa von Aehrenthal to turn away from the traditional policy of maintaining status quo on the Balkans. However the Austro-Hungarian statesman viewed this situation as an opportunity to a rapprochement with Russia. At the end of summer 1908 he therefore started negotiations with his Russian counterpart Alexander Izvolsky concerning the status of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Keywords

Austria-Hungary, Ottoman Empire, Russia, Diplomacy, Young Turks, Bosnia, Herzegovina

⁴² Aehrenthal to Berchtold, 20. 7. 1908, Moravský zemský archiv v Brně (Moravian Provincial Archives), Fond G 138 (Family archive of Berchtolds), Kt. 133.