

The Phantom of Bosnia-Herzegovina Revolt 1875-1878

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Abstract

The Ottoman administration in Bosnia-Herzegovina which began in 1463 was based on Islamic laws. The local people accepted the Ottoman administration and had lived under its rule for 412 years. However, this was disrupted by a revolt in Bosnia in 1875 when Christian Slavs accused the government for maladministration and that the Christian welfare had been neglected. On this pretext the Serbians started a revolt. The Serbians were ambitious in wanting to annex Bosnia-Herzegovina as a part of Serbia's territory and to create a Greater Serbia. This paper examines the role played by the Serbia in Bosnian revolt of 1875. The study is based on British documents.

Introduction

The Bosnian-Herzegovina community consists of the ethnic Slav who migrated to the Balkan Peninsular in the seventh century. The north west of Bosnia-Herzegovina is bordered by Croatia, while the southern and the Eastern parts are bordered by Serbia, which also has the same ethnic Slavs population.¹ The Slav communities in the Balkan Peninsular also known as the South Slavs came from Eastern Europe. They are divided into Eastern Slavs (Russia and Ukrainian) and Western Slavs (Poland and Czechoslovakia).²

Bosnia-Herzegovina under the Ottoman Empire

Bosnia-Herzegovina had been under the Ottoman rule since 1463, following the expansion of the Ottoman power in the Balkan and after the defeat of Serbia in the Kosovo War of 1389.³ The conquest of Bosnia by the Ottomans ended the Dushan Empire under King Karageogvitch of Serbia and it also marked the beginning of an Islamic Government in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

¹ H.C. Darby, Bosnia and Hercegovina, In. Stephen Clissold (ed.), *A short history of Yugoslavia*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1966, pg. 58.

² Roger Portal, *The Slavs*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd., England, 1969, pg. 1.

³ The war was called 'Kosovo' because the name was initially taken from the place where the war started between the Ottoman armies and the Serbian armies in Kosovo. Kosovo is a province in the Balkan Peninsular.

The Ottoman administration in Bosnia-Herzegovina was warmly accepted by the Bosnian community. In fact, some of the people of Bosnia-Herzegovina were Bogomils who had converted to Islam. Furthermore, the Catholics preferred to be under the Ottoman rule rather than the Serbian rule, as under the old Serbian rule only the Orthodox Christians enjoyed privileges while other religious groups were suppressed.

The acceptance of the Ottoman's rule by the people of Bosnia-Herzegovina provided the space for the Islamic government to administer the province for almost four hundred years. However, a revolt opposing the Ottoman government erupted in 1875. It started in Nevešnin, Herzegovina, and flared into a war between the Muslims and the Christian throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina. The main reason for the revolt was to overthrow the Ottoman administration in Bosnia-Herzegovina and replace it with a Serbian Christian government. In order to achieve this objective, the Christians accused the Ottoman administration in Bosnia of incompetence and failure in carrying out the Hatti Humayun⁴ successfully. One issue was the Islamic practices in the administration of Bosnia-Herzegovina. They claimed that the Islamic laws were unsuitable for the administration of Bosnia-Herzegovina. This was one of the contributing reasons that sparked the revolt against the Ottoman Empire.

Bosnia-Herzegovina Revolt 1875

The revolt that erupted in Bosnia-Herzegovina can be classified in two stages. It initially began as a disturbance which was started by not more than ten Serbs who were staying in Nevešnin, Herzegovina.⁵ As no effective action was taken by the government to curb the disorder it turned violent and spread to other districts with increasing number of followers supporting the rebels.

The revolt started in Herzegovina after 164 Serbs returned from Montenegro to their village in Nevešnin. They had left Nevešnin on July 2, 1875. A few months later they made an appeal to the Ottoman government to return to Nevešnin. Shortly after, they started the disturbance. They claimed that they were oppressed and had refused to pay their taxes. Through intimidation, they forced their neighbours in the surrounding districts to join them.⁶

⁴ This is an agreement between the Uthmaniah government and the European big powers on the 18th of February 1856, namely before signing the Paris Agreement in 1856. According to the Hatti Humayun's agreement, the Uthmaniah's government had promised to improve the quality of management and social throughout its empire through a reformation. However, the main reason is to reinstate the Uthmaniah image.

⁵ *ibid.*, pg. 31.

⁶ Consul Holmes to Earl of Derby, Doc. 7, Bosna-Serai, 2 July 1875, In. D. Gillard (ed.), *British Documents on Foreign Affairs (BDFA): Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print*, University Publications of America, Britain, 1984, Part 1, Vol. 2, pg. 53.

To curb the disturbances, the government sent Haidar Bey⁷ and Petrarchi Effendi⁸ from Sarajevo as their representatives to discuss the demands of the insurgents. Before they could reach Nevessin, dissatisfied peasants who had been forced or persuaded to join the rebels, attacked and captured a caravan of 25 horses on the road between Mostar and Nevessin. The horses which belonged to some merchants from Sarajevo were killed in the incident.

The group led by Tchoubate had divided his 300 followers into small groups. This was done to attack the people along the road in the districts of Kruppa, Mostar and Meteovich. The insurgents burned houses and properties to intimidate the people. In these attacks, the insurgents killed five Muslim merchants who travelled from Mostar to Nevessin to trade their wares. These merchants were Salih, Kassumovich, Marich Samich, Ali and another person whose identity was unknown. According to a report from the Commissioner in Mostar, the headless bodies of these Turks, which were found buried, were recovered by the authorities.⁹

This murder in July 1875 aroused the 'assabiyah' spirit among the Muslims in Mostar. They wanted to take revenge against those responsible for the atrocity that was committed to their Muslim brothers. But the government told them not to stir things up to avoid more bloodshed between the Christians and the Muslims. They were told to leave the responsibility to the authorities.

The negotiation between the representatives from the government and the insurgents took place on 16 July 1875. Haidar Bey and Petrarchi Effendi, the government's representatives, gave them the assurance that the government would look into their demands but, in return, they were told to stop their subversive activities and lay down their weapons.¹⁰ However, the insurgents refused to comply until the government had fulfilled their demands, which the government could not. The government needed more time to consider their demands. The insurgents' refusal to surrender their weapons threw the district into further turmoil and beyond government control. Under these circumstances, the government ordered seven to eight battalions of the reserve army units to suppress the disturbances in the villages of Belgrade and Selvidor in Nevessin. However, the troops could not put down the revolt as there were too many followers.¹¹

⁷ Government officer in Sarajevo

⁸ Government officer in Sarajevo

⁹ Consul Holmes to Earl of Derby, Doc. 8 Bosna-Serai, 9 July 1875, November 1876, In. D. Gillard (ed.), *British Documents on Foreign Affairs (BDFA): Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print*, University Publications of America, Britain, 1984, Part 1, Vol. 2, pg. 54.

¹⁰ Consul Holmes to Earl of Derby, Doc. 15, Bosna-Serai, 24 July 1875, In. D. Gillard (ed.), *British Documents on Foreign Affairs (BDFA): Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print*, University Publications of America, Britain, 1984, Part 1, Vol. 2, pg. 58.

¹¹ *ibid.*

This encouraged the rebels to attack Muslims and others who did not support their guerilla activities. The Ottoman government's approach in not using force and not sending armies at the initial stage to stop the rebellion was to avoid a high-handed action. They preferred diplomatic strategy in dealing with the rebels. However this turned to be ineffective.

The disturbances changed into full-scale rebellion on 6 August 1875. The Christians burned the houses of Muslims houses and destroyed their crops. They also ambushed 1000 government soldiers who were on guard in Nevessin. The cruelty and arrogance of the insurgents resulted in the government sending in between three to five army battalions to control the situation.¹²

The second revolt took place 10 days later in Gradiska, Bosnia. The revolt was believed to have been started by a prisoner who had managed to escape to Bosnia. He had incited the Christians to create disorder and to go against the government. This resulted in a large number of the people, Muslims and Christians alike, to flee to Austria for their safety. In this incident a lot of houses and property were destroyed. The Slav press reported that the Muslims were responsible for the incident. The cruelties carried out by the Christians were intentionally omitted by the press and the information that appeared was misinterpreted.¹³

The revolts in Bosnia became more violent and turned into a war. In Klek, the aggressors burned houses belonging to Muslims and Christians who had refused to join them. They caused untold cruelty to the Muslims including women and children. For example, they were reported to have burned two innocent Muslim children to death.¹⁴ This again had caused the people to flee to neighbouring countries like Dalmatia, Montenegro, Croatia and Austria. The number refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina affected by the 1875 rebellion were estimated to about 156,000.¹⁵

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Acting Consul Freeman to Sir H. Elliot, Doc. 42, Bosna-Serai, 21 August 1875, In. D. Gillard (ed.), *British Documents on Foreign Affairs (BDFA): Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print*, University Publications of America, Britain, 1984, Part 1, Vol. 2, pg.72.

¹⁴ Consul Holmes to Earl of Derby, Doc. 54, Mostar, 22 August 1875, In. D. Gillard (ed.), *British Documents on Foreign Affairs (BDFA): Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print*, University Publications of America, Britain, 1984, Part 1, Vol. 2, pg. 77-78.

¹⁵ Extracts of despatches relating to Administrative reforms in Bosnia. Doc 1. November 1876, In. D. Gillard (ed.), *British Documents on Foreign Affairs (BDFA): Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print*, University Publications of America, Britain, 1984,, Part 1, Vol. 2, pg. 38.

As the insurgency became critical the Governor of Bosnia-Herzegovina requested that the rebels to surrender their arms and made an amnesty on 30 Mac 1876 to those who wanted to surrender. The terms were¹⁶:

- i. amnesty for those who wanted to surrender voluntarily
- ii. one-year exemption from tax
- iii. the government promised to review all problems faced by the people of Bosnia-Herzegovina, especially on the taxation in the effected districts.

However, the negotiation failed because the rebels did not want to accept the terms made by the government. Instead, they came up with their own demands. These included that¹⁷:

- i. Christians should be given at least a third of the land as their property
- ii. government had to withdraw the troops in Herzegovina and should only maintain garrisons which should be recognized as necessary in the following places: Mostar, Stolatz, Trebigne, Nicholsich, Pleolje and Toccie
- iii. the government was required to rebuild the houses and churches which had been burnt, provide food and agricultural implements for at least a year and exempt them from taxation for three years from the date of their return.
- iv. Christians would not lay down their arms until the Muslims had been disarmed and until all reforms were fully and effectively implemented.

Furthermore, the rebels demanded that the European powers¹⁸ intervene and ensure that the Ottoman government carried out the reforms in their administration. Besides, they also wanted Russia and Austria to establish agents, who would ensure that the reforms in Bosnia-Herzegovina were carried out as demanded.

But the Ottoman government was confident that their internal problems could be solved without foreign intervention. They believed that foreign intervention would only reveal the weaknesses of the Ottoman Empire. This would be seen as an insult to the government. Therefore peace could not be established because Serbia had planned to highlight the Bosnian conflict to European powers.

Serbia's Role in the Bosnia-Herzegovina Revolt of 1875

The Serbian ambition to take revenge on the Ottoman government had been in the Serbian mind for a long time. This followed Serbian's defeat to the Ottomans in the Kosovo war of 1369. The Ottoman victory in Kosovo not only brought down the Serbian Empire but had also established a base for Islam in the Balkan area and had put the Slavs,

¹⁶ *ibid.*, pg. 36.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, pg. 37.

¹⁸ European powers refer to Ottoman, Britain, Russia, German, Austria-Hungary, French and Italy.

including the Orthodox Christians under Islamic rule. Before the Kosovo War, Bosnia-Herzegovina was part of the Serbian Empire. Although the Serbians were defeated they never ceased in their efforts to regain the Serbian Empire and work towards the creation of a *Greater Serbia*. Greater Serbia was a dream to unify all the territories of the Southern Slav, especially Bosnia-Herzegovina under Serbia. Bosnia-Herzegovina was important to the creation of Greater Serbia for various reasons. Firstly, from the geographical perspective Bosnia's territory borders that of Serbia. Without Bosnia-Herzegovina, it was impossible for Serbia to create Greater Serbia. In addition, the people in Bosnia-Herzegovina originated from the same Slav family like Serbia. In fact, the population of Bosnia-Herzegovina was made up of a large number of Serbs. The Bosnian Serbs speak the same language as the Serbs in Serbia and belong to the same church, the Orthodox Church. Therefore, the unification of Bosnia-Herzegovina with Serbia would have meant the first step in the creation of Greater Serbia. The Serbs believed in establishing the Orthodox Christian religion as the main religion in the Balkan.

Secondly, Bosnia-Herzegovina was important to Serbia because Bosnia provided a passage to the Adriatic Sea, which was a strategic route for Serbia for its defense and trade. Bosnia-Herzegovina would be a pulse for the Serbian economic development in the future. Beside Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia was also ambitious to control other Slavs in Slovenia, Croatia and Dalmatia stage by stage in order to unify Serbia and achieve their dream of creating a Greater Serbia. All these Southern Slavs would be dominated and ruled by Serbia under the Karageoragovich dynasty. Serbia's intention was to preserve and safe guard the Serbian constitution and tradition, which would be applied to all the Southern Slavs under Serbia. For these reasons, the Serbs were only too willing to associate themselves with the rebels in Bosnia-Herzegovina. They considered it an opportunity in making Greater Serbia a reality.

To achieve this aim, Serbia tried to create hostility between the Christians in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the government. Before the revolt erupted in 1875, the Serbian Corps had attempted to reach Sarajevo and another location near the Bosnian frontier. They had carried with them weapons and military equipment into Sarajevo to start the insurrection but were driven back into the mountains by the Turkish troops, supported by the population.¹⁹ However, the Serbs did not stop there, they goaded the people to sabotage and fight against the Ottoman government in 1875.

For example, to capture the attention of the government, they created disturbances such as robbery and fighting with the Muslims in certain districts in Bosnia-Herzegovina. They did this to get response from the Muslim military and to engage them in a conflict. The revolt was not initiated by the Bosnian people but it was a conspiracy that was planned by Serbia. In this effort Serbia had the backing of Russia. The latter had an agent

¹⁹ Sir A. Buchanan to Earl of Derby, Doc. 47, Constantinople, 1 September 1875, In. D. Gillard (ed.), *British Documents on Foreign Affairs (BDFA): Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print*, University Publications of America, Britain, 1984, Part. 1, Vol. 2, pg. 74.

placed in the pan-Slav propaganda in the Balkan state including Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Slav propaganda was actively carried out by the Serbia to call all Christians to rise and take up arms to revolt against the Ottoman government.

Russia, as the head of the Slav family, had entered into a system of intrigue against the Turks a few years earlier. She had sent her consular and other agents to Bosnia-Herzegovina provinces to preach about the Slav union and freedom. Besides, Russia had secretly organized a system of resistance among the Orthodox Christians. The resistance would also serve as a channel for the Russians to identify potential leaders from among the insurgents to carry out their mission. Another objective was to force the Ottoman government to admit its failure in governing Bosnia-Herzegovina and, hence, hand over the governance to the insurgents or withdraw from the territory²⁰

The press in Serbia had also spread false news about oppression and mismanagement by the Ottoman administration against the Christians in Bosnia-Herzegovina. It claimed that the Bosnians had also wanted to break from the Ottoman rule and had demanded that autonomy be granted to them. They hoped that the European powers would listen to their problems and would put pressure on the Ottoman government to give autonomy over Bosnia-Herzegovina to Serbia. However, the reality was completely different from what was reported. Actually, the Bosnians wanted to remain under the Ottoman Empire. They only hoped that the administration in Bosnia-Herzegovina would improve in the future. The truth was that the Bosnians were forced by the Serbian insurgents to rise and demand autonomy of power from the Ottoman government.²¹

Serbia also announced that their subjects fully supported the revolts in Bosnia-Herzegovina. As proof of their support, they supplied arms to the insurgents in Bosnia-Herzegovina to ensure the success of the revolt. The war equipment that belonged to the Serbian government was found in the insurgent's camps.²² In fact, a large number of the insurgents were made up of people from Serbia, Montenegro and Dalmatia. Besides, Serbia had also given their moral support to the insurgents in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Serbia had motivated the insurgents with a false report that they had succeeded in their fights against the Ottoman government. Serbia reminded the Christian insurgents that their brothers in Russia would come to their assistance and that independent parties in Serbia would also join and support their cause.

²⁰ Extracts of despatches relating to Administrative reforms in Bosnia. Doc 1. November 1876, In. D. Gillard (ed.), *British Documents on Foreign Affairs (BDFA): Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print*, University Publications of America, Britain, 1984, Part 1, Vol. 2, pg. 4.

²¹ Consul Holmes to the Earl of Derby, Doc 85, Mostar, September 24, 1875, In. D. Gillard (ed.), *British Documents on Foreign Affairs (BDFA): Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print*, University Publications of America, Britain, 1984, Part 1, Vol. 2, pg. 94.

²² Extracts of despatches relating to Administrative reforms in Bosnia. Doc 1. November 1876, Doc 1, November 1876, In. D. Gillard (ed.), *British Documents on Foreign Affairs (BDFA): Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print*, University Publications of America, Britain, 1984, Part 1, Vol. 2, pg. 36.

At the same time, Serbia had secretly increased the training of their army in preparation of an attack against the Ottoman government.²³ They had provided a large amount of money to make the plan successful including assisting the rebels. All this activities were secretly carried out by Serbia.²⁴ On August 1875, Serbia sent 40 fully armed soldiers who were supplied with medicine to cross the Bosnia-Herzegovina border. Their objective was to help the insurgents fight the Ottoman forces. This group was led by five Serbian officers who were from the Ministry of Defense.²⁵ These officers had trained the insurgents to rebel against the Ottoman government. This led to a large number of Serbian people to move into Bosnia-Herzegovina. The insurgents made the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina worse by helping and encouraging the Christians to start the riots in Bosnia.

In September 1875, it was estimated that about 10,000 Serbian troops had been mobilized to invade Bosnia-Herzegovina.²⁶ On 30 September 1875, the Serbs, who were fully equipped with arms, crossed the border. These insurgents destroyed the districts of Yenivarosh and Preboi. At the same time, thousands of Serb insurgents had also gathered at Tashlidge to demonstrate against the government. In Bosnia, the situation became critical when the rebels action created a war between Christian Slavs and the government forces. The Serbian insurgents had intimidated the wealthy people from Herzegovina to join them. They had forced these people to leave their houses and join the demonstration in Grahovo, a place chosen by the Serbians as their base. To secure their plan, they burnt down the houses in the area and forced the homeless to join them.

However, in order to restore peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia was advised by Russia against putting any pressure on the Ottoman government. This prompted Serbia to exercise restraint. However Serbia saw this as an opportunity to strengthen her army for a future attack on the Ottoman government.

Therefore, maladministration and mismanagement claimed by the Christian Slavs as reasons for them to rise and fight against the Ottoman Empire was a pretext conjured by Serbia. This was stated in a report by the British Consul in Mostar:

²³ Consul General White to Earl of Derby, Doc.29, Belgrade, 23 August 1875, In. D. Gillard (ed.), *British Documents on Foreign Affairs (B DFA): Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print*, University Publications of America, Britain, 1984, Part 1, Vol. 2, pg.65.

²⁴ Consul General White to Earl of Derby, Doc.37, Belgrade, 20 August 1875, In. D. Gillard (ed.), *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print*, University Publications of America, Britain, 1984, Part 1, Vol. 2, pg.69.

²⁵ Consul Taylor to Earl of Derby, Doc.58, Ragusa, 23 August 1875, In. D. Gillard (ed.), *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print*, University Publications of America, Britain, 1984, Part 1, Vol. 2, pg.81.

²⁶ Consul General White to Sir H.Elliot, Doc.103, Belgrade, 27 September 1875, In. D. Gillard (ed.), *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print*, University Publications of America, Britain, 1984, Part 1, Vol. 2, pg.101.

*It is a great mistake to attribute this insurrection entirely to the Turkish misrule. The people have been persuaded and forced to rise by Servian and Montenegro political intriguers, who will not now permit their misguided victims to act otherwise than they think fit.*²⁷

Conclusion

The 1875 revolts in Bosnia-Herzegovina were not caused by an internal problem. Serbia had played a major and important role in inciting the Christian Slavs in Bosnia-Herzegovina to go against the Ottoman government. The move was to fulfill Serbia's ambition of replacing the Ottoman government with Slav leadership in the Balkan. It was part of Serbia's dream of creating a Greater Serbia. Serbia was ready to invade Bosnia-Herzegovina, having prepared her agents and military for this purpose. However, the timely intervention of the European powers prevented an all-out war between the two parties.

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²⁷ Consul Holmes to Sir H.Elliot, Doc.86, Mostar, 10 September 1875, In. D. Gillard (ed.), *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print*, University Publications of America, Britain, 1984, Part 1, Vol. 2, pg.95.

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