

HOME RULE FOR THE BALKANS?
THE IDEA OF INTERNATIONAL CONTROL IN OTTOMAN
MACEDONIA IN THE WRITINGS OF THE BALKAN
COMMITTEE (1903–1908)¹

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Introduction

Throughout the 19th century the Balkans had a distinguished place in power politics due to its strategically and politically crucial geographical position. The gradual shrinking of the Ottoman Empire and the unfolding local national movements put the region in the forefront of Great Power politics. The aim of this paper is to investigate a certain aspect of diplomatic cooperation in the last decades of the “long 19th century,” namely, the European Great Powers involvement in the Macedonian crisis in the first decade of the 20th century. It is not my intention to contribute directly to the continuously evolving scholarly inquiry on balkanism (or orientalism), the discourse that surmise a way of thinking and approach to the Balkans and generally to the “East” by Western societies. However, the contents of these discourses had a considerable effect on the nineteenth-century Great Power management of the region. As the political expansion of Europe heightened over the globe in the modern era, Europeans began to reassess their various dispositions towards the rest of the world. Thus, as Jennifer Pitts noted, they were reading their extending military supremacy as a clear

¹ The research for this paper was financed by the Hungarian Eötvös State Scholarship program of the Tempus Public Foundation.

evidence of their moral or cultural superiority too.² Contemporary observers placed the Balkans on the borderlands between Western and Eastern civilizations accordingly to this imaginative geography. In the last couple of decades, investigating the nature of the “Other” in the Balkans has been a fruitful research area, and it has provided new and insightful ways to rethink the political, cultural, and economic relations between (Western) European countries and their Southeast European counterparts.³ The present paper attempts to put the international management of the Macedonian Reforms of 1903–1908 under investigation in a similar approach. I argue that contemporary European political, international law and cultural thinking posited this area in the “East,” and therefore answered the challenges coming from it accordingly.

Recent studies have investigated the 1903–1908 period of the Macedonian Question from a rather practical perspective: mainly they focused on the international management of reforms in Macedonia. Nadine Akhund analyzed this period in the context of international cooperation. In the actions of the European Concert she identifies the evolution of multilateral cooperation which would be institutionalized after World War I.⁴ Julian Brooks demonstrated the work of British gendarmerie officers in the Sanjak of Drama during the Macedonian Reforms. His evaluation suggests that the work of the international gendarmerie officer corps serviced in the vilayets can be seen as the embodiment of nowadays peace-keeping efforts.⁵ In his remarkable book, Davide Rodogno investigates the history of the humanitarian interventions to the Ottoman Empire in the long nineteenth century. In his opinion, the Macedonian case cannot be seen as a humanitarian intervention in the classical sense of the term, however, there are several

² J. Pitts, *Boundaries of the International. Law and Empire*. Cambridge 2018, p. 1.

³ See: M. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford 1997; K. E. Flemming, *Orientalism, the Balkans and Balkan Historiography*, “American Historical Review” 2000, vol. 105, no. 4, p. 1218–1233; A. Hammond, *Typologies of the East: On Distinguishing Balkanism and Orientalism*, “Nineteenth-Century Contexts” 2007, vol. 29, no. 2–3, pp. 201–218; D. Gürpınar, *The Rise and Fall of Turcophilism in Nineteenth-century British discourses: Visions of the Turk, ‘Young’ and ‘Old’*, “British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies” 2012, vol. 39, no. 3, pp. 347–372.

⁴ N. Akhund, *Stabilizing a Crisis and the Mürzsteg Agreement of 1903: International Efforts to Bring Peace Macedonia*, “Hungarian Historical Review” 2014, vol. 3, no. 3, p. 587.

⁵ J. Brooks, *A ‘Tranquilizing Influence’? British ‘proto-peacekeeping’ in Ottoman Macedonia 1904–1905*, “Peace & Change” 2011, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 172–174.

characteristics which resembles other similar cases.⁶ In their illuminating book about the emergence of the practice of humanitarian intervention, Alexis Heraclides and Ada Dialla do not even count the reforms in Macedonia among the long nineteenth-century cases of humanitarian action.⁷ However, the goal of this paper is to explore the intellectual and ideological aspect of the Great Power intervention in Macedonia through the spectacles of a liberal pressure-group, the London-based Balkan Committee. Having analyzed the various publications of the Committee, and the personal papers of Noel Buxton, I believe that the proposals and ideas set forth by the members of the Committee were framed in the contemporary liberal internationalist mind which was closely associated with the concept of humanitarianism.

Humanitarian Interventions

The concept of humanitarian intervention is still a much debated issue, regardless of political affiliation it has numerous supporters and critics alike.⁸ In *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, British historian Duncan Bell defines it as follows:

Humanitarian intervention, actions undertaken by an organization or organizations (usually a state or a coalition of states) that are intended to alleviate extensive human suffering within the borders of a sovereign state. Such suffering tends to be the result of a government instigating, facilitating, or ignoring the abuse of groups falling within its jurisdiction. This abuse often takes the form of deliberate and systematic violations of human rights, including forced expulsions, ethnic cleansing, and, in the most extreme cases, genocide. Humanitarian intervention can apply also in situations where there is no effective government and civil order consequently has collapsed.⁹

⁶ D. Rodogno, *Against Massacre. Humanitarian Interventions in the Ottoman Empire 1815–1914. The Emergence of a European Concept and International Practice*, Princeton–Oxford 2012.

⁷ A. Heraclides, A. Dialla, *Humanitarian Intervention in the Long Nineteenth Century. Setting the Precedent*, Manchester 2015.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 1–3.

⁹ *Duncan Bell: Humanitarian Intervention*, [in:] *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/humanitarian-intervention> [Access: 30.10.2019].

In light of the history of the 20th century, it is no wonder that Bell had no trouble to use an extensive vocabulary to describe the violation of basic human rights what calls for a humanitarian intervention. The concept of such multilateral action was gradually formulated in the course of the 19th century which, however, could not use modern taxonomy to describe massive violent acts against human life. Nowadays, there is a constantly growing body of literature on the emergence of humanitarian intervention, and as it seems, it provides a very fruitful framework to rethink some aspect of the history of the Eastern Question too. In the past decades numerous publication appeared in order to investigate the intellectual and political traits of this modern concept from either from a historical or from a political science and jurist perspective.¹⁰

As recent research has demonstrated, the origins of “intervention on the grounds of humanity,” to use a very nineteenth-century phrase for humanitarian intervention, can be traced back well in history. From ancient authors to the political thinkers, for instance Hugo Grotius, of the early modern period, the main concern of the debate was the nature of “just war” which involved cases of interventions too. Historical scholarship generally attributes the implementation of the principle of state sovereignty to the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648.¹¹ Certainly the principle did not eliminate conflicts or wars from the international relations of European states but, by admitting a state’s exclusive jurisdiction over its territory, it laid down the principle of non-intervention in to the domestic affairs of another state. In the course of the 18th century, European jurists further elaborated this concept in details. According to Heraclides and Dialla, the concept of non-intervention was rather the invention of these 18th-century jurists, namely the German Christian Wolff and the Swiss Emer de Vattel.¹² The latter emphasized in his influential book, *Le droit des gens ou principes de la lois naturelle* (1758), that “states are free and independent and no foreign power has the right to intervene or judge their conduct.”¹³

¹⁰ See: D. Rodogno, *Against Massacre*, op. cit.; For a political science point of view see: A. Heraclides, A. Dialla, op. cit.; G. J. Bass, *Freedom’s Battle. The Origins of Humanitarian Intervention*, New York–Toronto 2008; J. Pitts, op. cit.

¹¹ D. Croxton, *The Peace of Westphalia and the Origins of Sovereignty*, “The International History Review” 1999, vol. 21, no. 3. pp. 569–591.

¹² A. Heraclides, A. Dialla, op. cit., p. 23.

¹³ Ibidem.

Consequently, an international community emerged whose members, in theory, considered themselves as equals in terms of sovereignty and they voluntarily applied the outlined principles in their conduct of foreign policy. This particular development occurred parallel with the beginnings of Western European global hegemony which was indirectly supported by the Enlightenment's endeavor of mental mapping the world based on imagined racial (and not necessarily racist) hierarchies.¹⁴ By the time of the 19th century, the international system and the born-to-be-discipline of international law had established a discriminatory hierarchy between European and non-European states based on the principle of the alleged superiority of European civilization.¹⁵ Therefore, in the conduct of international relations, European and non-European states, for instance the Ottoman Empire, were regarded as unequal members of the international community, even though for a short period of time the Ottoman Empire was admitted to the Concert of Europe too.¹⁶ Consequently, the principles laid down by European jurists were not to be applied in respect to these extra-European states. The idea of progress, a concept profoundly praised since the Enlightenment, and the ambiguous term of "standard of civilization" endowed the Great Powers of Europe a handy justification for their imperial expansion and to interfere to a non-European state domestic affairs, particularly to the Ottoman Empire.¹⁷ What was peculiarly new was the justification of the intervention on humanitarian grounds.

In the course of the 19th century, we can witness several precedents which involved the Great Powers in military conflicts where humanitarian concerns were at stake. Nineteenth-century international law jurists regarded an intervention legitimate if a set of criteria would meet. According to this, intervention was needed to counteract gross mistreatment and/or massacre of a certain groups of population which was "shocking to the conscious of mankind". In the nineteenth-century context, this meant the prevention of massive persecution of Christians or European citizens in non-European territory. However, in the jurists'

¹⁴ See Larry Wolff classic study on the subject: L. Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford 1994.

¹⁵ D. Rodogno, *Against Massacre*, op. cit., p. 22.

¹⁶ F. Adanır, *Turkey's Entry to the Concert of Europe*, "European Review" 2005, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 395–417.

¹⁷ A. Heraclides, A. Dialla, op. cit., pp. 32–33; H. Case, *The Quiet Revolution. Consuls and the International System in the Nineteenth Century*, [in:] *The Balkans as Europe, 1821–1914*, eds. T. Snyder, K. Younger, Rochester (NY) 2018, pp. 110–138.

view, collective action of the Great Powers was required to guarantee the intervention's international legitimacy and to limit possible abuses. Last but not least, the motivation behind the international action should come from humanitarian concern, the feel of compassion to the sufferers without seeking any gains from the existing situation (disinterestedness).¹⁸

Scientific literature regards the Great Powers' involvement in the Greek War of Independence (1821–1830) as the first instance of humanitarian intervention, despite the fact that the very concept did not exist yet.¹⁹ However, in the Balkan Committee's argumentation, the best examples of such actions were the intervention to the Lebanon in 1860–1861, and to Crete in the late 1860s and in 1897. They argued that these precedents provided all the necessary patterns to bring relief to Macedonia.²⁰ However, they misleadingly concluded from these events that if once the Ottoman administration was removed all complications would be ceased. They connived at the complexity of the Macedonian lands, and neglected the various, opposing interests either of the neighboring Balkan states or that of the Great Powers in the region.

The Apple of Discord: Macedonia at the turn of the 20th century

By the last quarter of the century, the Ottomans' possessions in Europe were merely confined to Albania, Thrace, and to the areas which contemporaries usually referred to as Macedonia, a shifting and evolving term in both space and time.²¹ Contemporaries usually meant by Macedonia an area in Turkey-in-Europe which constituted by the vilayet of Salonica and substantial parts of the Monastir (Bitola) and Kosovo vilayets.²² At the turn of the 20th century, Ottoman Macedonia

¹⁸ A. Heraclides, A. Dialla, op. cit., p. 58.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 103.

²⁰ *The Macedonian Crisis. The Balkan Committee presents the following summary of the situation in the Near East, 1903*, Arthur Evans Collection, EVA 1/1.

²¹ N. Akhund, op. cit., p. 588; For further literature on the delimitation of historical Macedonia see H. R. Wilkinson's still not exceeded work: H. R. Wilkinson, *Maps and Politics: a Review of the Ethnographic Cartography of Macedonia*, Liverpool 1951.

²² Macedonia was also not a definite geographical term, however, as British historian Douglas Dakin noted, arbitrary frontiers can be assigned to denote the area in question: "Lake Ohrida and Prespa in the west, the Shar Mountains and Crna Gora to the north, the Rila and Rhodope Mountains to the north east, the river Mesta (Nestos) to the east,

was inhabited by various ethnic and religious communities which did not share a common national identity in a modern sense; they rather identified themselves in pre-modern terms such as religion, and other non-national loyalties.²³ However, this population had become the main target of each of the neighboring Balkan states' national propaganda, as they all claimed some parts of this territory according to their national unification programs. To this end, since the last third of the 19th century, a vast body of literature has been published by various Balkan intellectuals and scholars in order to justify their rightful national claims for the territory both in their respective countries and in Western Europe too.²⁴

By the turn of the century, the attention of European public opinion turned to the Balkan Peninsula once again, particularly to Macedonia. Increasing unrest and revolutionary activity, especially after the failed Uprising of Gorna Djumaya (today Blagoevgrad) in 1902, mobilized the Great Powers to demand reforms again for the European part of the Ottoman Empire. Having read well European politics, Abdulhamid II (1876–1909) obviated this step and promised reforms in December 1902. The program was not directed only at the “Macedonian” vilayets of Salonica, Monastir, and Kosovo; all provinces of the empire in Europe were made subject to the new measures, which added Janina, Shkodra, and Edirne to the new administrative unit, called the *Rumeli Umum Müfettisliği* (General Inspectorate of Rumeli). Hüseyin Hilmi Pasha, a veteran of Ottoman administration who had held, among other posts, the governorships of Adana and Yemen, was appointed as head the inspectorate with the title *Rumeli Vilayetleri Müfettis-i Umumusi* (General Inspector of Rumeli Provinces).²⁵ However, the Great Powers did not want to let the promise of the Sultan to be turned into a dead letter, so in order to assure the implementation of actual reforms several individual diplomatic attempt had done.

the Aegan Sea, Mount Olympus and the Pindus Mountains to the south [...]” D. Dakin, *The Greek Struggle in Macedonia, 1897–1913*, Thessaloniki 1993, p. 3.

²³ K. Brown, *Loyal unto Death. Trust and Terror in Revolutionary Macedonia*, Bloomington–Indianapolis 2013, pp. 14–21; There is an enormous body of literature on the question of identities in the modern Balkans. For examples see: A. Karakasidou: *Fields of Wheat, Hills of Blood. Passages to Nationhood in Greek Macedonia, 1870–1990*, Chicago–London 1997.

²⁴ I. Ilchev, *My Country—Right or Wrong! The International Propaganda of the Balkan States in Europe and in the United States 1821–1923*, “Bulgarian Historical Review“ 1995, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 32–50.

²⁵ İ. Yosmaoğlu, *Blood Ties. Religion, Violence, and the Politics of Nationhood in Ottoman Macedonia, 1878–1908*, Itacha–London 2014, p. 33.

The two most interested powers in the Balkans, Austria-Hungary and Russia acting upon the Article 23 of the Treaty of Berlin,²⁶ with the consent of other powers, proposed the Viennese Plan to the Sultan.²⁷ This proposal was in addition to the December statutes of 1902, and it called for to broaden the rights of the provincial administrations, to employ Christian field guards, and also a call for amnesty for political prisoners.²⁸ Steven Sowards notes that the Sultan accepted the scheme in 48 hours because he viewed the Austro-Hungarian–Russian move as a conservative effort to maintain his control over the territories in question.²⁹ The interest of all Great Powers was to bring order and peace to the region, therefore they did not support any possible change of the *status quo* but the pacification of the region.

In light of the reluctant European reactions the local revolutionary organizations, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (henceforth IMRO) in particular, had to move as his goal was to attain the intervention of the Great Powers, and consequently to secure autonomy for Macedonia.³⁰ However, IMRO put their lot on a general uprising which should be started in the upcoming summer. After long preparations, the Ilinden Uprising broke out on 2 August 1903. After some initial success the rebellion was doomed, and the Ottoman military troops, with the help of Muslim irregulars, eliminated all resistance until mid-autumn. In response to the developments, in September 1903, Emperor Francis Joseph and Tsar Nicholas II met in a hunting lodge near Mürzsteg, in Styria, to discuss the complications of Southeastern Europe. They drafted a new program which in essence was very similar to the earlier Viennese Points, but they also wished to involve the other Great Powers in the regulation of the Macedonian problem.³¹ The

²⁶ Article XXIII of the Treaty ordains the implementation of “similar laws adapted to local requirements” in the European parts of Turkey in the spirit of the Organic Statutes of 1868 which had been inaugurated in Crete. It intended to convoke a special commission in order to draw up a reform scheme for European territories of the Porte. See: *Treaty between Great Britain, Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Russia, and Turkey for the Settlement of Affairs in the East. Signed in Berlin, July 13, 1878*, “The American Journal of International Law” 1908, vol. 2, no. 4, p. 412.

²⁷ N. Lange-Akhund, *The Macedonian Question, 1893–1908. From Western Sources*, Boulder–New York 1998, p. 136.

²⁸ İ. Yosmaoğlu, op. cit., pp. 33–34.

²⁹ S. Sowards, *Austria's Policy of Macedonian Reform*, Boulder 1989, p. 26.

³⁰ D. Rodogno, *The European Powers' intervention in Macedonia 1903–1908: an instance of Humanitarian Intervention?*, [in:] *Humanitarian Intervention: A History*, eds. D. J. B. Trim, B. Simms, Cambridge 2011, p. 208.

³¹ N. Lange-Akhund, op. cit., p. 142.

Mürzsteg program appropriated the appointment of two civil agents to the office of the Macedonian Inspector-General, namely to Hilmi Pasha, in order to supervise the implementation of the reforms and to counsel the Inspector-General. It aimed to reorganize the gendarmerie, and also the judicial and administrative structure of the involved vilayets. It was clear to all observers that the Great Powers wanted order in this part of Europe, so the intervention was rather endorsed the recovery of Ottoman control over the Macedonian provinces.

In Duncan Perry's evaluation, in the short run, the uprising did not gain anything for Macedonia and IMRO. During the fights the organization lost several of its leaders, and it became irretrievably divided along factions.³² Moreover, it discredited the Ottoman Statutes of December 1902 and the Austro-Hungarian-Russian Viennese Points, and made the question a European one.³³ On the other hand, the Ilinden Uprising and its suppression evoked greater public attention and interest to the Macedonian question, and also to the Western lobby-groups who aimed to improve the plight of the local Christians inhabitants. One of these organizations was the Balkan Committee.

Balkan Committee and the reforms in Macedonia

Noel Buxton, the founder of the Balkan Committee visited the Balkans in 1899 for the first time by an advice of his doctor.³⁴ This travel made him to dedicate himself to the study of the region, and began to feel the need to raise the concern for the Macedonian peasants in the British public. As early as 1901 he was thinking of establishing a committee to promote this cause. However, in a letter to Buxton, Francis Seymour Stevenson, Chairman of the Council of the Byron Society, wrote that he and other leading members of the society believed that "as long as the South African War lasts it would be hopeless to arouse any widespread interest in England in the affairs of the Near East, and more harm than good would result from any attempt at public agitation at the present time."³⁵ Nevertheless, Buxton continued to study the history

³² D. Perry, *The Politics of Terror. The Macedonian Revolutionary Movements, 1893–1903*, Durham–London 1988, p. 139.

³³ S. Sowards, op. cit., p. 29.

³⁴ N. Buxton, *Travels and Reflections*, London 1929, p. 49.

³⁵ *F. S. Stevenson to Noel Buxton, 29 October 1901*, Noel-Buxton Papers, Balkan Committee—1903–1910, MS 951 c. 24/1.

and the political problems of the area, and eventually, according to one of Buxton's sisters, Victoria de Bunsen, he and his brother, Charles Roden, established the Balkan Committee already in 1902.³⁶ Despite there is no publication or meetings held under the auspices of the Balkan Committee until the summer of 1903, Noel Buxton set forth his ideas and insights on the possible troubles and solutions of the Macedonian Question in different platforms. In a pamphlet written in 1902, he believed that the Turkish "misrule" in Albania and other areas inhabited by Greeks or Serbs were serious but Macedonia was the only place where the European powers' intervention would seem probable.³⁷ He also argued that the British public opinion should be prepared and be informed regarding the matters of European Turkey because at that moment it was full of negative prejudices about the Balkan Christians. Albeit Buxton stressed that the liberation movement (the IMRO) represented a spirit that all English should applaud, and this freedom consequently implied the future capacity of progress.³⁸

The brothers could gather the support of many influential members of the British political and public life in the forthcoming period up to the suppression of the Ilinden Uprising. Among them was James Bryce, one of the old comrade of William E. Gladstone, the Liberal leader of the Opposition, during the Bulgarian Agitation movement in 1876–1878, and also a promoter of the cause of the Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire. Bryce's experience in lobbying was a major factor in that he became the first president of the Balkan Committee, but he also signaled the presence of the Gladstonian liberal legacy in the Committee's intellectual make-up. Bryce accepted presidency and set out the future tasks of the committee in a letter he wrote to Noel Buxton on 3 July 1903. In his views, there was an urgent need for such a committee to watch the progress of events in Macedonia, and the Committee ought for the present to be confined to obtaining and diffusing information and views, exciting interest in the subject and advocating measures calculated to secure peace, and put an end to oppression, bloodshed and cruelty without directly challenging any of the Powers with which a Liberal Government might have to deal.³⁹

³⁶ V. de Bunsen, *Charles Roden Buxton. A Memoir*, London 1948, pp. 54–55.

³⁷ N. Buxton, *Recent Notes from the Balkans*, [in:] *The Macedonian Question. With an Introduction by Francis Seymour Stevenson, M. P. (Chairman of the Council of the Byron Society)*, London [1902], p. 36.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ Cited in T. P. Conwell-Evans, *Foreign Policy from a Back Bench 1904–1918. A Study based on the Papers of Lord Noel-Buxton*, London 1932, p. 3.

The organization announced its foundation on the pages of 28 July 1903 issue of the liberal-radical daily newspaper, the “Manchester Guardian.” Their task was to provide precise and reliable information about the state of events in Macedonia, and also to bring the issue before the British government in order to exercise some influence and to execute a reform program in the disturbed vilayets. It was generally accepted among the membership of the Committee that Great Britain had enormous responsibility in placing back Macedonia under Ottoman sovereignty at the Congress of Berlin in 1878.⁴⁰

During the reforms in Macedonia the Balkan Committee attempted to place the question in the forefront of British public opinion. Recent scholarship has revealed that how pre-1914 liberal lobby-groups, such as the Balkan Committee, connected domestic, imperial, and international questions together.⁴¹ As Noel Buxton recalled later, from the end of August 1903, they became intensely busy with work. “We secured a big room in Adelphi Terrace in the house of Bernard Shaw, and there, overlooking the river, we organized meetings and produced leaflets which secured public notice both here and abroad in a measure out of all proportion to our diminutive numbers.”⁴² After the Ilinden Uprising was suppressed, the Committee organized more than 300 meetings nationwide, and also held common conferences with similar French organizations.⁴³ The aims of these meetings were manifold. On the one hand, they aimed to gather as wide public support behind the Committee’s memorandums and proposals sent to the Foreign Office as much was possible. On the other hand, they also collected donations to finance the Macedonian Relief Fund which also led a relief mission to the spot in early 1904. Beside public meetings, the Committee’s members constantly wrote to several newspapers and journals where they intended to inform the public about the situation in Macedonia. Members of parliament also raised the question in both houses of the British Parliament.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ *Misrule in Macedonia—An English Balkan Committee*, “Manchester Guardian” 28 July 1903, p. 5.

⁴¹ J. Perkins, *The Congo of Europe: The Balkans in early Twentieth-century British Political Culture*, “The Historical Journal” 2015, vol. 58, no. 2, p. 568.

⁴² *Draft on Autobiography—Balkan Reform*, MS 951 c. 8/2.

⁴³ D. Rodogno, *The European Powers’ intervention*, op. cit., p. 213.

⁴⁴ For a general outlook of the Balkan Committee’s activities see: R. B. McCormick, *Noel Buxton, the Balkan Committee and Reform in Macedonia, 1903–1914*, [in:] *Antiquity and Modernity. A Celebration of European History and Heritage in the Olympic Year 2004*, eds. N. C. J. Pappas, Athens 2004, pp. 151–164.

The Balkan Committee (and also other lobby-groups in France and Italy) viewed that the Mürzsteg reforms and so the European control in Macedonia should have had to go further than assisting Austria-Hungary and Russia's conservative reorganizing attempt in the Balkans. It should be emphasized that the "experts" who shared an interest in the plight of the Macedonian inhabitants were overwhelmingly liberals and liberal-radicals who believed that the Balkan question in general was a question of civilization.⁴⁵ Peter Mandler suggests that in the course of the development of nineteenth-century British political thinking, Liberals (and Conservatives alike) tended to see the British Empire as the one which developed the highest civilization in the world. However, British intellectuals did not regard this as a distinctly British capacity to progress, but rather as an universalistic human potential.⁴⁶ The close association of progress with the notion of "civilization" established a virtual scale which enabled European thinkers, in general, to posit countries and nations on it according to their perceived level of civilization. "The standards of civilization" was a quite ill-defined concept during the 19th century, and of course, it was the privilege of "those nations who achieved the highest levels of civilization" who could judge and grant full membership to the international community of "civilized nations". Generally, the elements of "the standards of civilization" were attributed to those states who could securing basic civil rights (to life, property, dignity, and to religion) to its citizens, and who could administer its territory with its full sovereignty (organized bureaucracy and capacity for self-defense). In their conduct of foreign policy they must adhere to the established principles of international law, and they also maintain permanent diplomatic relations with other states. There was also a very ambiguous criteria that a country's society should conform "to norms and practices of 'civilized' society."⁴⁷ The global practices of international law and diplomatic protocol, as Jennifer Pitts has recently demonstrated, were molded and dominated by European principles and practices, certainly, reflecting the European Great Powers' increased power over the rest of the globe.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ D. Dauti, *Britain, the Albanian Question and the Demise of the Ottoman Empire 1876–1914*, Leeds 2018, p. 98.

⁴⁶ P. Mandler, 'Race' and 'Nation' in *Mid-Victorian Thought*, [in:] *History, Religion, and Culture. British Intellectual History 1750–1950*, eds. S. Collini, R. Whitmore, B. Young, Cambridge 2000, pp. 242–243.

⁴⁷ A. Heraclides, A. Dialla, op. cit., p. 33.

⁴⁸ J. Pitts, op. cit., pp. 10–27.

British intellectuals and policy-makers overwhelmingly shared this understanding of international relations. Therefore, it should be emphasized that liberals were seeking to establish international order on the grounds of justice, orderly governance all which would enable the material and moral progress of peoples in question. This means that the majority of liberals of the Balkan Committee promoted self-government as sort of Home Rule within an existing political unit, and they were not clearly advocated national self-determination.⁴⁹ Even referring to the already independent Balkan states, James David Bouchier, the famous Balkan correspondent of “The Times” and a very important agent of the Balkan Committee, described them in an infantilizing manner. As he put it, “[...] They must still remain under the tutelage of Europe. Let us hope that Europe will awake to her responsibilities towards these wayward children; [...]”⁵⁰ However, it was generally accepted that some sort of European guidance and control was required in the whole Balkan Peninsula. The establishment of independent states in 1878 had not indicated the Great Powers’ conviction that the application of national idea in the Balkans was the most suitable way to stabilize the region, but they rather imagined a set of client states what could have been hold in check by them, thereby securing the area’s peace and its tranquil progress.

International control and reform: the views of H. N. Brailsford and Noel Buxton

Immediately after the suppression of the Ilinden Uprising, the Balkan Committee urged the British Government to take a leading role, operating within the European Concert, in the settlement of the question. By reading the different texts produced by the members of the Committee, it becomes evident that according to the group the solution to the Macedonian Problem should be an international one,

⁴⁹ I must note that Diana Mishkova views that „one of the abiding impact of British liberals’ enmeshment in the *Balkan problematique* before World War I was the imposition of the nation-state as the gold standard of civilisation—the idea that a community could develop fully and progress only within independent national borders.” D. Mishkova, *Beyond Balkanism. The Scholarly Politics of Region Making*, London-New York 2019, p. 24.

⁵⁰ J. D. Bouchier, *The Balkan States – Their Attitude towards the Macedonian Question*, [in:] *The Balkan Question. The Present Condition of the Balkans and of European Responsibilities*, eds. L. Villari, New York 1905, pp. 88–89.

and they fundamentally referred to earlier precedents of European intervention, thereby they formulated their suggestion in the contemporary framework of international law and diplomatic practice. In a pamphlet published by the Balkan Committee in the aftermath of the uprising in 1903, titled *The Macedonian Crisis*, the authors (it is most likely that it was written by Buxton himself and co-authored by James Bryce, the first president of the Committee) proposed to the British Government that in a joint action with the other powers, they should demand the acceptance of the following solution from the Porte. Most importantly the “withdrawal of Turkish troops from Macedonia proper, the appointment of a European governor, with complete control of the civil and military administration, and the establishment of a gendarmerie commanded by European officers.”⁵¹ The author also suggests that “if precedents of successful intervention are needed, there are two clear cases in point—that of Lebanon in 1860–61, and that of Crete in 1897.” The author claims that by the intervention of France and England, with the consent of the rest of the Powers, the autonomy which was granted to the Lebanon resulted in the growth of commerce and agricultural production in the province, and due to this peaceful prosperity its population had doubled.⁵² In the same publication, the writing of P. W. Wilson, the Honorary Treasurer of the Balkan Committee, is very suggestive regarding how British imperial and domestic liberal political agenda intertwining with the British perception of civilization had influenced the narrative of Southeast European events. Placing the Macedonian case in context, Wilson posits it in a successive line of uprisings against “Turkish misrule.” After enumerating the liberation of Greece, Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, and Romania from Turkish domination, he adds the examples of Crete, Cyprus, Lebanon, and finally Bosnia and Herzegovina which all were granted “a tolerable system of government.”⁵³ Wilson meticulously denotes the Ottoman Christian subjects’ deprivation of franchise, of safety of property and of equal access to public offices. It is striking that he also sees “the struggle with the Turks has been from first to last a struggle for womanhood.”⁵⁴ Through the lens of the Macedonian situation he reflects to the current Liberal agenda of British domestic

⁵¹ *The Macedonian Crisis* 7, EVA I/I.

⁵² *The Macedonian Crisis*, [in:] *Macedonia 1903. Published by the Balkan Committee*, London 1903, pp. 6–7.

⁵³ P. W. Wilson, *The General Situation*. [in:] *Macedonia 1903*, op. cit., p. 9.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

politics, such as the ever-troubling Irish question and question of women enfranchisement. By presuming that a decent government would reconcile the disturbing population he evokes one of the basic requirement of belonging to “the club of civilized nations” where the state must secure basic rights to its citizens and orderly administration through its territory. Finally, Wilson concludes that these turbulent lands should not present “insuperable difficulties to the honest administrator” such as “those areas which, like Bosnia, Herzegovina, or the Lebanon, are administered somewhat on the *Egyptian system* [emphasis added], are becoming prosperous under a tutelage that is fair to all creeds and all races included therein.”⁵⁵ In the case of Macedonia, he proposes a joint protectorate over the Balkan confines of the Ottoman Empire, thereby „no further trouble will arise within those divisions of the Ottoman Empire.”⁵⁶ The establishment of a sort of international supervision over the involved Macedonian territories is a key issue in the Balkan Committee’s writings during the period under scrutiny. Some of the leading figures of the Committee gave elaborated accounts on their vision about the nature of international control, which make it possible to investigate the perception of the Macedonian question in the British liberal mind.

Henry Noel Brailsford was a well-known radical journalist, whose name became identical to liberal internationalism during his quite long career.⁵⁷ Brailsford in his well-known and much cited account, *Macedonia: its races and its future* (1906), provides the reader a general outlook of the different groups of Macedonia, and the everyday life in the aftermath of the Ilinden Uprising and its brutal suppression by the Ottomans. His first-hand knowledge of the region was due to his experiences during a relief work in Ohrid organized under the auspices of the Balkan Committee.⁵⁸ In the last chapter of his aforementioned book, Brailsford summarizes his opinion on the implemented reforms, and he also delivers his ideas on a possible satisfactory solution. Brailsford’s main assumption, among many other Europeans’ as well,

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁷ On Brailsford see: G. Giannakopoulos, *Internationalism between National Questions and Imperial Considerations: Henry Noel Brailsford and the Transformation of Central and Eastern Europe (1898–1919)*, “History of European Ideas” 2018, vol. 44, no. 2, pp. 244–259 and F. M. Leventhal, *The last Dissenter. H. N. Brailsford and His World*, Oxford 1985.

⁵⁸ F. M. Leventhal, *H. N. Brailsford and the Search for a New International Order*, [in:] *Edwardian Radicalism 1900–1914. Some Aspects of British Radicalism*, eds. A. J. A. Morris, London-New York 1974, p. 204.

was that until the Ottomans were governing Macedonia there would be neither peace nor reform.⁵⁹ Brailsford envisaged an international society which would manage international questions in accordance with the assumed civilizational hierarchies of his time.⁶⁰ In this particular case, he regarded the Concert of Europe as an international body empowered by its assumed superiority in civilization to control another (mostly non-European) state's territory. It is very clear that the position of contemporary lawyers had a significant impact on Brailsford's views. Moreover, it is very likely that, based on his Edwardian radical views, he wanted the realization of a modernized version of the European Concert led by the "Liberal Powers", namely Great Britain, France, and Italy, which aimed to "restrain the appetite of aggressive capitalism and [...] uphold the ideal of 'worldwide brotherhood'."⁶¹ We cannot fail to see the contours of this imagined "international organization" as the forerunner of the post-war League of Nations.

For Brailsford, the only possible solution to end the disturbances in Macedonia was the imposition of European control. According to his scheme, Macedonia should be governed by a Board of Delegates from the Five Protecting Powers, independently from both the Sultan and the Ambassadors in Constantinople.⁶² The Board would be responsible directly to the Great Powers' governments. Contrary to the Mürzsteg program which was supposed to reorganize the gendarmerie forces of the vilayets by dividing the whole area into sectors supervised by each protecting powers, Brailsford suggests instead of the territorial sectioning that each protecting power should be assigned to a certain branch of administration.⁶³ He argues that Austria should manage the economic affairs of the vilayets, taking into consideration her accomplishments in Bosnia and Herzegovina. To this end, she might take charge for Public Works and Agriculture. Brailsford saw Russia, as the major Orthodox power, fit to manage education and church matters of the vilayets. As of the rest of the powers, Brailsford highlights one specific administrative fields for each: England, utilizing her experiences in Egypt, should run the courts and local administration, and France should be responsible for finance, taking into consideration of her already existing interests in Ottoman banking and finance in general. By the decision of the Mürzsteg program, the task of reorganizing the

⁵⁹ H. N. Brailsford, *Macedonia and its races and its Future*, London 1906, p. 315.

⁶⁰ G. Giannakopoulos, op. cit., p. 252.

⁶¹ F. M. Leventhal, *H. N. Brailsford and the Search*, op. cit., p. 202.

⁶² H. N. Brailsford, op. cit., p. 322.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 325.

gendarmerie of the vilayets was assigned to the Italian general, Emilio de Georgis (1844–1908), who worked with an international body of officers. In Brailsford's view the management of Public Order should be assigned to Italy, as they had already gained experiences in Crete.⁶⁴ It is somewhat appalling to read from an ardent critique of imperialism such as Brailsford was, that he envisioned a paternalistic reform, administered by the Great Powers. What is striking in Brailsford's argument, is its evident similarity to imperialist's justification to maintain colonial rule. Although we must not fail to realize colonial attitudes in this proposal, I think we can rather grasp here the real weight of the "standards of civilization".

As I pointed out earlier, European observers began to doubt the Ottomans capacity to reform their empire successfully from the 1870s onwards. In his book, *Europe and the Turks* (1907), Noel Buxton wonders "whether anyone ever believed that the Turk would so alter his habits as to conform to Western ideas."⁶⁵ Almost all Balkan Committee members agreed that the Turkish administration should be virtually removed from Macedonia. Buxton also shared this opinion. As early as 1902 he elaborated in a pamphlet the possible risks around the Macedonian problem, which was generally seen by contemporaries as a potential threat that eventually leads to a "European conflagration." In this writing, he rather reckons with the solution by occupation. As he put it "of the five districts which we may live to see set free [...] have of course one satisfactory fate, viz. to be redeemed by their own parent nations."⁶⁶ However, he also found Austrian and (or) Italian occupation as a possible solution: taking into consideration an Austrian occupation of Macedonia he believed that

If circumstances ever brought about this Austrian descent one might say in favour of it that Austrian rule has been successful in Bosnia, or at least has shown religious impartiality (the agents of the British Bible Society find more religious liberty there than in Austria itself), that the Greeks would much prefer Austria to Bulgaria, that the violence of Serbo-Bulgarian rivalries would be suppressed, and that perhaps the balance of power in Europe would best be served at the same time.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Ibidem.

⁶⁵ N. Buxton, *Europe and the Turks*, London 1907, p. 99.

⁶⁶ Idem, *Recent Notes*, op. cit., p. 42.

⁶⁷ Ibidem, pp. 43–44.

During the Macedonian Reforms (1903–1908) he articulated his views several times on various platforms. Later, in his above mentioned book, *Europe and the Turks*, he musters four possible solutions: the Great Power occupation, annexation by the Balkan states, joint international control, and self-government.⁶⁸ Among them he promotes the idea of international control, as according to him, momentarily this solution best fits the complex realities of the region.⁶⁹ However, he failed to give a detailed account on the practical side of this control as Brailsford did. In his conclusion he gives an appalling example of how most contemporaries saw this uneven relationship between the “West and the rest”: “if in one respect, such abominations as those of the Congo are more deplorable because performed by Europeans, those of Turkey are, without exaggeration, *the greatest atrocity on the surface of the world, because the sufferers themselves are civilized beings* [emphasis added].”⁷⁰ The examples given above shed some light on the controversial understanding of the region complex problems by British observers. On the one hand, the enthusiasm for the “oppressed Balkan Christians” of most British liberals (and also members of the Balkan Committee) derived from an often radical tinge inspired by their Gladstonian heritage and the strong belief in progress and social justice, what they strongly articulated in their domestic political discourse. On the other hand, they applied without hesitation the established views of contemporary international law (and often colonialist political thinking) on the asymmetrical relationship between the “civilized West” and its “semi-civilized” periphery, and therefore they regarded the establishment of a tutelage or protectorate (“a decent government”) essential to bring peace and prosperity to the region, and last but not least, to avoid an “European conflagration” because of the “Near East”.

Conclusion

All in all, the reform in Macedonia eventually failed due to several reasons. Also, the total international control of the area, the Committee’s primary goal, was never truly realized. Nevertheless, the Mürzsteg program made some improvements in the vilayets, especially in terms of the reorganization of the gendarmerie and of local administration,

⁶⁸ N. Buxton, *Europe and the Turks*, op. cit., pp. 100–102.

⁶⁹ Ibidem, p. 102.

⁷⁰ Ibidem, p. 130.

but it could not achieve its main aim: to pacify the region. The contest between the rival nationalities plunged the region into absolute anarchy, as well as the cooperation of the Great Powers became more and more complicated, and finally impossible. The proposals set out by the Balkan Committee, though never realized, demonstrates the intertwining relationship between Liberal political agenda, international law, and colonialism as well. I believe, there is much room left by earlier research to further investigate the questions set forth by the pioneer researches on the evolution of international law, and its vital relation with empire and the notion of civilization. There is still a painfully huge gap in historical literature over the role and intellectual make-up of the numerous foreign-policy pressure-groups of the era, such as the Balkan Committee was.

After the July Revolution 1908, the Young Turks proclaimed a constitution to the Empire, promised equal rights and modernization to its citizens. The Balkan Committee changed its course of action: it started to support the new Young Turk regime. We can conclude that its purpose, in this period between 1903 and 1908, was not to promote particular national interest, that is, self-determination which eventually leads to national independence, but rather to realize a sort of “Home Rule” and granting constitutional rights to the Balkan Christian subjects of the Ottoman Empire within the empire itself. Nevertheless, it turned out soon that the promises of the Young Turks revolution were to be just shattered dreams, and by the time of the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 many British liberals, and most of the members of the Balkan Committee finally supported the division of Macedonia on ethnic lines between the Balkan states.

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Abstract

Humanitarian intervention is a relatively new concept in international relations. Although the origins of interventionism can be traced back well in history, its humanitarian aspect had been gradually formulated during the course of the 19th century. In my paper I focus on the ideas and proposals of the London-based Balkan Committee to solve the “Gordian Knot of the Balkans”: the Macedonian Question. In 1903, after the abortive Ilinden Uprising, the European Great Powers concerted to pacify Ottoman Macedonia and to implement reforms in the judiciary and administrative systems, which became known as the Mürzsteg Program. The representatives of the Committee such as its founder Noel Buxton or the well-known journalist at the time, Henry N. Brailsford, suggested international control for Macedonia “by establishing a Government responsible to the Powers.” I argue that their ideas were influenced by the notions of contemporary international law which deeply internalized the period’s European perception of civilizational hierarchies of the world.

Keywords: humanitarianism, liberalism, Southeastern Europe, Macedonian Question, intervention

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