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The Persecution of Balkan Turks in the Last Period of the Ottoman State and Balkan Wars

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Abstract

Balkan Wars is an important milestone in terms of modern Turkey's process of establishment with the last period of the Ottoman Empire. The centuries-long domination of the Turks in the Balkan geography dates back to the period of Atilla. Ottoman domination, which started in the 14th century in the region, continued until the 20th century, regardless of the distinction between religion and nationality. In addition to those who belong to Christian, Muslim and Jewish religions in the Balkan region, the Ottoman state, with its fair and peaceful policies; has managed different nations such as Turkish, Bosnian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Greek and Croatian together for centuries in an environment of peace and order. However, in the last period of the Ottoman State, the atmosphere of peace that has been going on for centuries in the Balkans has begun to disappear. This article, by benefiting from the information mentioned above, in the birth of modern Turkey's process of persecution faced by Muslims living in the Balkans and Turkey and is intended to express unfavorable conditions.

Key Words: Political psychology, Balkan Turks, Ethnic conflicts, Religious conflicts, Balkan wars.

Introduction

From the beginning of the 19th century, Russian-backed movements will redraw the fate of the Balkan geography. This process, which started with the Serbian revolt, caused the revolts of other peoples in the region and the turmoil dominated the Russians with the ambitions of Panslavism. As the Ottoman Empire started to lose power in this process, the calm environment started to lose its effect. In the 1877-1878 Ottoman-Russian War, the withdrawal from the Balkan lands and the persecution of the Turks continued to increase.

The Ottoman Empire was seen as a major obstacle to the states with political ambitions on the Balkan geography. The process that started with the revolt movements caused the atmosphere

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of chaos to prevail instead of the peaceful environment that lasted for centuries. This process was perhaps the revenge of Kosovo, Istanbul, Trabzon, Thessaloniki, Crimea or Vienna. The 19th century, full of conflicts, remained from the peace process, which was described as the Paxottoman period ruled by the Turks. The effect of the process taking place in terms of geography has some consequences that will affect the present-day Turkey. Turkey has contributed to the demographic structure of the Republic because of migration from the regions.

The statements in the Prime Ministry Ottoman Archive (PMOA) records are indicative of how hard the period was. Besides, the eyewitnesses of the brutalities experienced in local newspapers and magazines are given. From these newspapers, such as *Hikmet*, *Peyam* and *Tanin* use the signatures of eyewitnesses. In addition, one of the most important works expressing the persecution of the Muslim people in the Balkans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is undoubtedly owned by American history professor Justin McCarthy. In his study *Death and Exile* (1998), Justin McCarthy analyzed the negative situations of Muslims in the Balkans and especially in Bulgaria. Again, our most important source of Bulgarian atrocities is the source of the Islamic Immigration Society. These association minutes can be considered as semi-official. In this topic, where there is no major resource shortage as a literature, most of the studies have been on political results. The work of Ahmet Halaçoğlu (1994), one of the sociological studies, is also remarkable. This study can be considered in terms of how the process in question affects the population of Anatolia.

The Method

This article aims to express the adverse conditions of Turks before the birth of modern Turkey, experienced in the Balkans consists of two parts. In the first part, we will briefly touch upon the Balkan Wars that prepared these negative conditions. In the second part, the conflict situation and the negative conditions faced by the Turks in the last period of the Ottoman Empire, especially due to the provocation of Russia, will be explained.

The article aims to express the subject by starting from the socio-political developments in the Balkans as a method. For this reason, in order to explain the negativities faced by the Turks in the Balkans, the method of evaluating the negative situations experienced in the Balkan Wars was preferred.

The article seeks answers to the following questions:

1. What is the situation of the Turks in the Balkans in the last period of the Ottoman Empire?

2. For what reasons did the Balkan peoples, who have been friendly and coexistent for centuries, have conflicted?
3. Which have faced adverse conditions the Turks living in the Balkans just before the birth of modern Turkey?
4. What consequences did all the negative developments have for the Balkan Turks?

A Brief Overview of the Balkan Wars

Russia's policy of Panslavism (Kurat, 1953, p.242) and its struggle with Austria in protecting the Balkans were effective in the war in the Balkans. With the Berlin Treaty of 1878, Russia, which had severely destroyed the Balkan lands, was not struggling with it and was trying to destroy Turkish domination completely. Balkan states, which are very difficult to come together, cannot solve the “churches issue” and Serbia was trying to expand northward, as claimed in Macedonia, which was left to Bulgaria.

The announcement of the Second Constitutional Era (1908-1920) and the policies of the Committee of Union and Progress caused the activities of the gangs to slow down. The biggest reason for the slowdown of the activities was that they acted with the society. While explaining that after the Berlin Agreement, Austria added Bosnia and Herzegovina to its territory; Bulgaria declared independence and declared that Crete joined Greece. Ottoman State administrators, who could not resist all these developments, started to review the correctness of the policies implemented. Having the opportunity to deal with the internal issues of the Ottoman Empire on the one hand, Russia succeeded in bringing together the Balkan states in sharing Macedonia. Alliance treaties were signed between Bulgaria-Greece on March 13, 1912, Montenegro-Bulgaria on August 1912, and Montenegro-Serbia on October 6, 1912 (Hacısalihoglu, 2019, p.176).

In a speech he made in *Chamber of Deputies* (Meclis-i Mebûsan) on July 15, 1912, Mr. Asım said that he was sure of the Balkans and that an alliance against the Ottoman State could not be established here (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, July 15, 1912). Those who formed the government were so confident that they would allow the Serbs to use the weapons they would use against the Ottoman over their land. Weapons from Europe would pass from the port of Thessaloniki to Serbia, and they would throw death to the Ottoman army (Yıldırım, 2012, p.75-92). The Tripoli War and the Rebellion of Albania, which started in the same period, will result in the resignation of Sait Pasha and the Unionists will withdraw from the government. The dismissal of the army, which was established by Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Pasha and called

the “big cabinet”, on the guarantee that there would be no war from Russia, would have negative consequences. After 120 battalions of experienced soldiers were discharged by the order of Gabriel Noradunkyan, the Unionists organized demonstrations using the students of Darülfünun to recapture the government. As a result of the rebelling Albanians taking refuge in Montenegro, the Ottoman State sent troops. On 3 October 1912, the Balkan states, the governments of Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece and Montenegro, by giving the common note to the *Sublime Porte* (Bâb-ı Âli), asked the Turkish government to give a mandate to the ex-Serbia, Macedonia, Albania and Crete in three days (Küçük, 2002, p. 22).

The First Balkan War started on 8 October 1912, with the declaration of Montenegro among the Balkan allies (Rastovic, 2013, p.162). The weakest state in the process seems to be Montenegro. They demanded that the Balkan States be distributed to national governments. The Sublime Porte responded very harshly and asked the ambassadors of Serbia and Bulgaria to leave the country. On October 13, both states declared war as an excuse. These states joined Greece the next day. The Balkan War began literally. The war, which started as two fronts, fought the Bulgarians on the Eastern front and all the elements in the West. Absolute Ottoman victory was expected when nobody gave a chance to these states trying to become a new state in the war (Küçük, 2002, p.22).

After the start of the war, the Bulgarian gangs destroyed Turkish towns, villages, houses, and places of worship. They attempted to destroy the regions they had to retreat while fighting the Ottoman armies. The Bulgarians turned the places of worship of Dimetoka, Thessaloniki, Serres and Edirne into churches. They made oppression and persecution obliging the people to change religion (PMOA, 318730/5). Not only Turkish villages but also Greek villages have taken their share from this destruction. As an example, Bulgarian soldiers who had to withdraw from Serez turned into ruin during the retreat (Alp, 1990, p.35). Around Dimetoka also faced these brutalities. Disruptors in military clothing raided the houses and caused incidents to cut the roads. The gangs that burned down during the war had made unbelievable persecution to Dimetoka and the surrounding Turkish Muslims.

In this process, political conflicts within the army were very effective in the course of the war. The Bulgarians defeated the army and proceeded up to Çatalca. Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Pasha’s government resigned on October 29 after the defeat of Kumanovo. Kamil Pasha’s government was established. Seeking an opportunity for the ceasefire, the Ottoman State took a coup with the Porte Raid carried out by the unionists and took over the administration again. Unionists had to cease fire after the disappearance of Edirne and Shkodra (Yıldırım, 2012, p. 80). With

the agreement signed on 30 March 1913, the war ended and the Ottoman rule in the Balkans ended. The demographic structure of the region has been reshaped after the Balkan Wars, which has been a turning point for the elements living together in Rumelia for centuries.

The Persecution of Balkan Turks

The persecutions in the region are targeted for Turkish identity and Islam. The progress of Islam in Anatolia and Balkan geography has gained great momentum with the Ottoman State. The Ottomans succeeded in becoming one of the powerful states of the region in the 14th century. The Ottoman State, which reigned in the region for five centuries, faced the persecution of Turkish-Islamic civilization in the region when it started to lose its power. The French Revolution had its first impact on the Empire on the Serbs. The Greek Rebellion that started later showed that the name of the Balkans will be remembered with chaos and conflict. Communities in the Balkans were influenced by the religion chosen rather than ethnicity (Alp, 1987, p. 28). We see that the Bulgarians tried to persecute Muslim Turks, especially during the Ottoman State's loss of power. The end of the Ottoman peace, which lasted for five centuries, started a period of chaos in the Balkans. Essentially, the start of this process arose after the 1877-78 Ottoman Russian War. After this war, nothing happened as before and the process of Balkan Wars caused bloody events.

Cities that have been burned down, looting works of civilizations and tortures are events that should not be forgotten in the Balkan War (Ayverdi, 2000, p. 31). The replacement of tolerance, persecution, chaos and terrible massacres of the five-century-old civilization in the Balkans began with the loss of power of the Ottoman State.

Whenever the dominant element of the region started to lose its power balance, it was subjected to persecution by other elements. The Ottoman State, which started to dominate the region with the 14th century, managed to hold many elements together with the national system it has implemented in the region and five centuries of tolerance prevailed in this geography (Brown, 2012, p. 72). The fact that the Bulgarians, who had the opportunity to lose the power of the Ottoman Empire, attacked the Turks who had been adjacent to them for centuries was among the things that should not be forgotten as a historical event (Âlâm-ı İslam, 1912, p.2).

Along with the Ottoman-Russian War of 1878-79, a systematic eradication policy was implemented against the Turkish community in Bulgaria. When the Bulgarians were in the late 19th century, with the support of the Russians, they implemented the policy of destroying

Turks and expelling them from the region. In this process, the Bulgarian gangs either martyred or extorted every Turkish and Muslim who came before them or made inhuman treatment. However, the turmoil in the region was shown to Europeans as if the Turks were bandit in the region and the Bulgarian gangs were declared innocent.

The Bulgarians, provoked by the Russians against the Turks, implemented this brutally since 1878 with the policy of ethnic cleansing. They practiced all the torture and assassination methods they learned on the Turks. Russians, who did not want to kill Muslims, tortured the Russians and burned their villages. Thus, they were kept away from aid to Muslim Turks. Together with the committee members who joined the Bulgarian Army, which went all the way to Thrace, they proceeded by massacring the people (Yaver, 1938, p.4). The provocation of the Russians is aimed at every inch of the country, targeting the whole territorial integrity of the Ottoman State. Every land in the Balkans and Anatolia was important for the political ambitions of Russia. In the Balkans, the common points of Serbs, Bulgarians and Armenians have been on the persecution of Muslim Turks (PMOA [Prime Ministry Ottoman Archive], 312709/121).

Bulgarian, Serbian, Greek armies and commanders attacked the civilian people of Muslim villages and towns who came before them, and other villages who have heard of these events, have left their places to live in peace until today (Yıldırım, 2012, p. 92).

As a result of the Balkan War, Bulgaria has captured many points of Edirne. Muslim Turks comprise a large part of this region's population. Therefore, it was very important for the Bulgarians to redesign this region (Şimşir, 1986, p. 18).

After the War of 1877-78, the aim of forcing the remaining of the Muslims to be migrated by persecuting some of them was expressed as purifying the Balkans from the Turks. However, the spread of nationalist ideas and the desire to embrace Muslim lands began to dominate among Christians living in the Balkans. (McCarty, 1998, p.163).

The Balkan War started in this environment and the idea that the Ottomans would win the war arose. At this point, it is an indication that the dominant forces are afraid of the Ottoman State even in that case (Bardakçı, 2009, p.61). Although the Ottoman population is twice as many as the Balkan States, there is not much difference in the number of soldiers. While the Ottoman army was around 400 thousand, Balkan armies are around 540 thousand. The war resulted in the defeat of the Ottoman armies. In fact, this is a result that no one expects. The reason for this is that the Ottoman Empire had lost its power to cope with the small-scale

states separated from it. The war ended and Mustafa Resid and Osman Pasha were sent to London to discuss the conditions. Europe preferred to remain silent against the crime of humanity as if nothing had happened. Muslims have not targeted any women or children, including during the war, since the first period due to their beliefs. Even when the injured enemy could not fight, he tried to cut fire and heal him (*Alemdar*, 5 October, 1912). In contrast, in 1912, in the villages attacked by the Bulgarians in Thrace and the Balkans, almost all the people, including older women, were attacked (Yaver, 1938, p. 35).

These attacks were carried out in a letter by Enver Pasha during the Balkan Wars (Alp, 1990, p.35):

It takes pictures of the mosques and churches destroyed by the widowed Muslim women and the orphaned children, the destroyed mosques and churches. They argue that this persecution must be made public in Europe.

Bulgarian gangs are ruthless enough to brutally kill innocent villagers and children. When the gangs found the opportunity, they tried to destroy the Muslim people from the region. The Ottoman army, which tried to take measures for this, attempted to send troops to certain routes. Unfortunately, these attempts were not enough to stop the brutality, and at the points such as Uzunköprü, Malkara, Keşan, brutality images continued to be staged. The Ottoman army made attempts to stop this migration and the brutality experienced Bulgarian Turks are fleeing from gangs, usually have preferred to emigrate. The Bulgarians, who could not even tolerate this migration movement, continued to plunder the Turks' homes and follow and kill those who fled. Curfews have been declared for Turks and those who do not open their businesses have been punished. People who have been persecuted in many respects have not been able to respond sufficiently to these persecutions (PMOA, 4140/310489).

Bulgarian gangs acted with the intention that Turks and Muslims should not be in the area in all areas during and after the war. During the war, drinking water areas used by civilians were damaged (PMOA, 4118/308795). In order to protect the water channels, soldiers from the Ottoman army were ordered by acting safely. Bulgarian gangs planned to destroy people with diseases such as typhoid, cholera, plague by throwing animal corpses at water points (PMOA, 112/12). Bulgarian gangs have no moral rules that a regular army would carry.

Muslims who migrated from the region were returned to their villages and their names were changed to Bulgarian names, and Muslim girls were married to Bulgarian boys and Muslim boys were married to Bulgarian girls. Muslims were forced into Christianity and after Christians were made, men were banned from wearing fez and women were not allowed to

wear a chador. Despite everything, the animals of those who did not want to leave their homes were extorted and forced to migrate with heavy taxes intentionally (Onelcin, 1986, p. 32). Thus, Bulgarians confiscated Muslims' homes, farms, fields and animals (Memisoglu, 1989, p. 61).

The fact that the Russians supported the Bulgarians in the region and provided all kinds of logistic support gave the Bulgarians a guarantee. The brutality that reached its climax with the Balkan War in 1912 will remain a black mark in human history. The region is a life policy for the Russians, with Russia's policy of Panslavism. With this policy, it will be possible to reach both the straits and the warm seas. Therefore, according to the Russians, foreign elements in the region should be eliminated (PMOA, 4106/307910; Bobroff, 2006). They practiced this role by giving it to different groups from time to time. Each plan focused on eliminating Muslim and Turkish elements from the region.

Impact of the Persecution of Balkan Turks

After the abolition of II. Abdulhamid and the declaration of the Constitutional Monarchy, amendments were made in the Law of 1876. Accordingly, the right to found an association and to convene while granting the weekly. In August 1909, Associations Law was regulated. Since then, he has acted in the style of *Rumelia Muslim Immigrants Society* which established in a libertarian manner brought by the constitutionalism. At the same time, *The Immigrant Newspaper* has started to be published as the publication of this society. The society was counted among the political societies in the newspaper (Refet, 1912, p. 29).

The persecution and brutalities were the beginning of a new era for Anatolian and Balkan history. The problem of settling refugees fleeing the war arose. Commissions have been set up to help immigrants eliminate their problems and seek their rights. Aiming at the benefit of immigrants, apart from the various commissions established local and foreign societies have been established which aim to meet their needs and to solve the problems they will face. One of these societies that published the *The Immigrant Newspaper* is the *Rumelia Muslim Immigrants Society* (Kerman, 1987, p.12).

The Immigrant Newspaper is a newspaper that aims to share, help and guide the troubles suffered by the refugees. However, he did not encourage immigrants to migrate, but on the contrary, he asked them not to leave their land unless necessary. It has always supported the immigrants settled in the lands within the Ottoman borders by migration; he has supervised and followed the government's actions in this direction. The newspaper has endeavored to

announce these injustices with full force by giving wide coverage to the injustices and atrocities against Muslims who had to stay in the Balkans and live away from the Ottoman lands. The place covered by the brutality described in the newspaper. When we look at the atrocities and brutalities mentioned, it is seen that especially Bulgarians are brutal towards Muslims.

These societies aimed to announce the struggle for rights and the brutality of those who migrated from the region to the persecution and the general public. As a result of the studies carried out in this direction, it was tried to reach this goal through visual publications such as newspapers and magazines. The Society, whose publications reminding the atrocities are very important, attracted attention with its poem reminding the Bulgarian atrocities in its issue (*Muhacir*, August 1, 1910, p.3):

Rumeli's mountain, the stone is crying!

Every head of water is crying in the blood!

Next to torn trunks

His dying friend is crying!

Look, there is not a single stove in this country!

The nightingale does not crow!

Those cute plains have taken wolves!

A shepherd does not carry their sheep!

The existence of various religions and languages in the Balkans played a distinctive role in the start of great wars. European states, especially Austria-Hungary and Russia, continued their struggle for competition and influence through communities in the Balkans and used the people of the region in their interests. As a result of these policies of the big states, states with crossing ethnic and religious borders emerged in the Balkans. Since these states were trying to create their nations, they tried to assimilate the minorities within their borders or to move them out of the country (Onelcin, 1982, p. 42).

The intolerance of the Bulgarians was generally religion-oriented. The Bulgarians, who did not tolerate Muslim elements, showed the same aggression to the Catholics. No divine activity that does not belong to the orthodox world is legitimate to them. With this thought, mosques were turned into churches and Muslims were forced to change their religion. If the people did not agree to change religion, they would face all kinds of disasters. Even old women and little girls were raped and almost every young person got their share from this attack (*Hikmet*,

December 21, 1912).

In the letters were written by the people in Istanbul in the region, persecution and brutality are intensely mentioned. In a letter it took the form (Alp, 1990, p.58):

Until this day I was in Plovdiv. Now I'm going to Sofia. Because I am not sure of my life here, it is impossible to explain what was deemed suitable for Turkish Islam in Plovdiv and its region in these three days. Here I will only describe the summary of the events. The Turks of Islam were put in prisons like a flock of sheep, whip, rifle butt, behind the sword and whipping. It is kept hungry and thirsty, and several of them get knife wounds every moment.

Encouraged by the progression of the Balkan allies against the Ottoman army, the non-Muslim people in the villages within the Ottoman borders also took a stance against the Muslims and stated that the land was now Bulgarian land and attacked. The European states, who made the opposite statement of these attacks, asked for the investigation of the issue and it was revealed that these allegations were unfounded. There are no casualties in the region rather than Muslim Turks (PMOA, 209109/125).

It is seen that this situation is reflected off an association giving information about the region (*Sebilürreşad*, 1328, 338, p.1):

Even Bulgarian children say to an Islam that they come across 'my father will cut you'. Especially let them see you as a fez. By saying "fez down" they crush the poor, just as they crush all the fez. They are obliging those who believe in Islam to wear Bulgarian hearts in particular. Here I have also necessarily worn the Bulgarian heart. Bulgarian savages, who broke the windows of Islamic households and got involved, battered and imprisoned men and attacked desperate women. Although this incident happened in the same Varna, the government did not pursue any of them.

During the process, the Ottoman State tried to take measures to punish the perpetrators but was not successful. In this context, the establishment of courts was ordered to punish the negativities experienced in Thessaloniki. Unfortunately, the war environment and the fatigue of the soldiers negatively affected the presence of criminals (PMOA, 154472/2060).

Turks and Muslims in the Balkans shared the same fate. The archives examined and the records of the immigration associations will be sufficient to reveal this brutality. Before the war started, 4.695.200 of the region's population, which was captured by the Greeks and the Bulgarians, was expressed as Christian and 2.315.293 as Muslim. It is known that approximately 1.500.000 people migrated to the Anatolian geography in this process. This figure corresponds to a rate of 62% in the region. During the war, 313.912 people migrated and marched in Istanbul. With the Convention Concerning the Exchange of Greek and

Turkish Populations, 398.849 people arrived in Turkey. In addition to 850.000 immigration to Anatolia, more than 600.000 people died. This population spreading into Anatolia has increased production.

As a result of the brutality faced by the people of the region, the Turks had to leave their homeland with the years of negative processes and tragedy. Thus, the people, who came to the region with a resettlement policy centuries ago, were persecuted and had to return with migration (PMOA, 1357/105). The Balkans was the gateway to Europe, where the Ottoman Empire grew and developed. The Anatolian population almost doubled with immigration. Disputes started to emerge among the people in the lands (PMOA, 320418/3121). The state, which gave importance to this issue, set a border between the people and the immigrants. Migration has been sufficiently advanced to affect the ethnic structure of the Anatolian population. The excess of this migration is actually another way of explaining the persecution (Halaçoğlu, 1994, p.45).

Conclusion

Balkan Wars revealed the national consciousness of the Anatolian people. This consists of the consciousness in Turkey, the Balkans experienced after the war occurred with the impact of negative attitudes and behaviors.

The region was once again a field of persecution with the Balkan Wars. Turks are the leading communities that are exposed to these negative policies of the Balkan states. Although Turks are one of the main elements of the region and especially in Bulgaria for a certain period time, they were subjected to various pressures and massacres by the European governments, especially by the directions of the European states, especially Russia.

At this point, this brutality that bandits wrote without any hesitation in their memories is an indication of what mentality they have. The Balkans have been a continuous conflict area in line with the strategy of the states that have political ambitions in this region for centuries. The Balkans, rather than the elements in the region, have become the fighting ground of dominant forces such as Russia, Germany, Italy and Austria. The Balkan War emerged as a move Russia would force the Ottoman to withdraw from this region.

As a result, the fate of the geography has changed as the Turks, who hold the cultural mosaic in the Balkans, started to lose their power. The persecutions remained as a date that the Turkish and Muslim people will not forget and pass on from generation. The ethnic and religious structure of the Balkan geography has changed with this cruelty and brutality.

Forced Christianization and immigration resulted in the reshaping of the region map. As one of the subject areas of political psychology, the Balkan geography and the persecution of Balkan Turks will continue to be among the unforgettable archives of political history.

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