

# THE TOPLICE UPRISING

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Our presentation deals with the so called Toplice Uprising. The uprising began between 20<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> of February and formally ended on 25<sup>th</sup> of March 1917. The facts regarding history of the uprising are well studied especially in the Serbian historiography. So, our major goal is to put the Toplice Uprising and Serbian resistance movement in general, within a broader context of the Bulgarian military rule in the conquered territories in Serbia, the Balkan tradition of guerilla warfare as well as the Balkan pattern of national consolidation processes.

The problem about Toplice Uprising, the violence and the atrocities during the First World War have a very uneven representation in Bulgarian and Serbian historiography and literature. The Bulgarian historiography focuses on Serbian atrocities in Macedonia during 1913-1915 as one of the preconditions which fueled Bulgarian public opinion and ultimately led Bulgarians to war. The Bulgarian conduct in Moravian district is a topic generally neglected by Bulgarian scholars and is almost untouched. Since the end of the First World War we can find out just a few sentences in major Bulgarian compendiums and a dozens of document were published in the 1990s by prof. Velichko Georgiev and prof. Stayko Trifonov in their unfinished documentary history of Modern and Contemporary Bulgaria. The silence of Bulgarian historians could be explained with the fact that the events do not fit in the prevailing metanarrative defining the First World War as part of the wars for national liberation and unification. It seems that the early Marxist historiography in Bulgaria was more open to discuss such issues but starting from early 1960s Bulgarian historiography began to whitewash the events and to revive some of the “useful” “Bourgeois” past especially when the national topics were in question.

On the contrary Serbian historiography puts a lot of energy to reveal the history of the uprising as part of the general narrative dedicated to the Serbian participation in the Great War. The initial publications on the topic consisted mainly of documentary collections and were aimed at defending the Serbian political goals at the Paris Peace Conference. The Serbs also published a huge corps of documents in three volumes on the Bulgarian violation of the international law. These initial works tried to describe Bulgarian rule as a violent oppression and systematic terror against the civil population. The documents were published in French. As a reply Bulgarians printed their own collection of documents called *The Truth about the Accusations against Bulgaria* also in French language. The very fact that the documents appeared in French revealed their target. After the war Serbs collected memories of some of the rebels and started to create a

national myth which became part of the larger and older myth about the Serbs as heroic martyrs. After the Second World War the Toplice Uprising was not so popular despite the fact that there were some works by Milivoje Perovic who was not a professional historian. It is interesting to point out that one of the major places of memory – the Surdulica ossuary build in 1924 and destroyed in the Second World War was not rebuilt after the war by the Communists. Tito's Yugoslavia was much more resolute to focus on the Second World War and the communist partisan heroic resistance diminishing the importance of narrow Serbian national past and the myths rooted in the First World War. Of course the topic was not a taboo, but wasn't a mainstream either. Among the reasons that Yugoslav historians downplayed the uprising was also the fact that the leading figure of the uprising Kosta Pecanac was also a Nazi collaborator during the WW2. With the revival of nationalism in Yugoslavia during the 1980s the topic became more visible in Serbian historiography. The tendency of growing historical and literature production was strengthened in the 1990s and the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century. Generally the explanation for this revived interest is not some particular anti-Bulgarian stance. The Toplice Uprising is an important part in the revived interest regarding the Serbian role in the First World War. We have to take into consideration the process of remaking Serbia as national state in the last 20 years and the questions of identity of Serbian nation which are still unresolved.

Our paper is based on a critical reading of the huge corps of Serbian published documents, Serbian historiography and Bulgarian, Austrian and German published and primary documents, and unpublished Bulgarian archival sources.

### **Toplice uprising in the broader context of Bulgarian Moravian Military Inspection Area**

Bulgaria lost the Second Balkan War and lands which were claimed by Bulgarian nationalism became part of Serbia and Greece. The regime imposed there, suppressed most of the people who showed pro-Bulgarian sentiments. The Greek and Serbian governments launched a nationalizing campaign of Serbianisation and Hellenisation of the acquired population. The main targets of repressions were those considered as bearers of national consciousness. Soon the First World War gave Bulgaria the opportunity to seek revenge. Bulgaria officially joined the Central Powers in September 1915. The main reason for choosing "German" side was Macedonia. After a brief German-Austrian-Bulgarian attack led by Field marshal Mackensen Serbia was defeated. As an outcome the Morava region came as additional territorial gain for Bulgaria. Before the war Morava region was semi forgotten by the mainstream Bulgarian nationalism although it was never completely dropped from the symbolic map of Bulgarian irredentist visions. Bulgarians organized these new acquired territories in what was called Morava Military inspection area. Its center was situated in the second Serbian capital, the city of Nish. Roughly speaking Morava military inspection area comprised the Eastern half of pre-1912 Kingdom of Serbia.

After the end of the campaign Bulgaria took basically the same measures to bulgarianize the conquered territories as Greeks and Serbs did not long ago in Kosovo and Macedonia. All those considered as leaders and bearers of the national idea were targeted as dangerous and “unreliable elements”. A process of mass deportations of officers, priests, school teachers’ judges, journalist, politicians etc. took place. During the deportation some of them were physically liquidated. Serbian language was prohibited. Serbian schools were closed down. Bulgarian ones were opened instead. Bulgarian priests replaced the Serbian priests. The family names were bulgarianized. But Bulgaria met a problem which was different than those met by Serbs, Greeks as wells as Bulgarians themselves in the territories taken from the Ottoman Empire after the Balkan wars. The Morava region was not part of a pre-national empire but integral part of national state for almost forty years. The Bulgarian military authorities almost immediately were confronted by a relatively well shaped national consciousness which obviously was not Bulgarian.

The first inspector-general of Morava area General Vasil Kutinchev underlined in his reports to the High command:

*The local population today, the population found here by the Bulgarian occupation authority is serbianized beyond recognition. There is not even a single case of voluntary studying of Bulgarian language. Long after the future peace what would be needed here would be an extraordinary strict military regime for the assimilation of the masses.*

It is interesting that the Bulgarian authorities were much more optimistic about the bulgarianization of the Christian population in Kosovo which was never seriously claimed by Bulgarian nationalism, but on the other hand it had not been part of some national state before 1912. For example Prishtina regional governor Bradistilov noticed in 1917:

*On a first glance everyone would raise the question why I divided the population on religious lines and not along the national divisions which is far more important. But if one spends little more time in the district and if he studies the district better, than he will realize that every other division is artificial and not corresponding to reality.*

[...]

*The national consciousness is so weak, that without any risk it could be considered zero. Religion is completely taken as nationality and that is why only the terms “Christian” and “Muslim” exist. If this is true about the Muslims, it is twice more true about the Christians. Everywhere and under all circumstances, when you ask someone about his nation-millet you will receive the answer – Christian or Muslim.*

*Despite their 40-years long systematic activity – here the Serbs had a consulate, a bishop, and schools, so on – they were not able to create “Serbian” population; it had remained “Christian” and it doesn’t care under what government it would live as long as it is not Turkish – it says.*

As mentioned above, the situation in Morava was different than the conditions in Kosovo. But this does not mean that the passive resistance to bulgarianization would automatically lead to armed resistance in the region under question.

### **Toplice uprising**

The first signs of armed resistance became visible in Montenegro under the Austrian regime. In the region of Kolasin captain Milinko Vlahovic and his brother Toshko founded one armed band. Jovan Radovic and Miljan Drljjevic were also rebels who originated from Moraca region in Montenegro. They would become prominent figures during the uprising too. Vlahovic and his men set off for Serbia in September 1916, intending to join the Russian forces in Romania.

There was another conspirator. His name was Kosta Vojnovic. He was a reservist second lieutenant in the Serbian army. Vojnovic was born in Northern Serbia, in the town of Smederevo. After the Serbian defeat in 1915-1916 he stayed with his father in Kosovska Mitrovica which in the meantime was part of Austrian occupation area. He formed an armed band on his own.

To use the words of Andrej Mitrovic Serbian population was “drawing fresh hope” from Romania’s entry into the war. In addition, rumors were circulating through the Bulgarian occupation zone that the Bulgarians intended to mobilize Serbs into their army, and as a result many young Serbs took to the woods. More and more people, mainly returnees, were gathering in the woods. Indeed Bulgarians had plans to mobilize Serbian population in the Bulgarian army but as a labor force not to be sent to Salonika front. Bulgarian sources underlined that the so called “Serbian element” was “notoriously unreliable”

Without Serbian government knowledge the Serbian supreme command tried to prepare for an armed action behind Bulgarian lines in the Morava valley in late September 1916. To that end Lieutenant Kosta Milovanovic Pecanac was sent by plane from the Salonika front to the village of Mehane where he immediately met already existing groups of guerrilla rebels.

Pecanac’s assignment was limited in scope. His arrival was actually closely aimed at ensuring support for an intended Allied offensive from the Salonika front. In short the aim of Kosta Pecanac’s mission was not to organize an uprising, but his arrival in fact had that effect. The news about the arrival of Serbian officer activated other existing factors such as: former

Serbian soldiers hiding in the mountains, young men fleeing from Bulgarian conscription, existing old brigands and the already formed *chetas* such as those led by Vlahovic, Vojnovic etc.

So when the uprising started, it was not on the strict orders of Pecanac. The uprising was a rather spontaneous mass revolt. It came after several months of escalation of tension and minor armed clashes between Serbs and the dispersed Bulgarian units mainly in the Southwestern border of Morava Inspection Area. The uprising was underestimated by Bulgarian commander Kutinchev who called the rebels “ordinary bandits”.

The rebels took several towns and dozens of villages in Bulgarian and Austrian occupation areas. The uprising lasted about a month and it was severely crushed by joint Bulgarian, Austrian and German efforts. During the uprising Bulgarian commander general Kutinchev was replaced by the former, present and future IMRO leader colonel Alexander Protogerov. During the suppression of the revolt Bulgarian troops set on fire whole villages and shot indiscriminately civilians. The exact number of victims is not known yet and it varies between 2000 and 20000.

The Bulgarians announced the end of the operations on 25<sup>th</sup> of March 1917 but it was the end of the mass uprising and not of the resistance movement at all. Big armed bands continued their activities and were able to conduct major attacks such as the attack on Ristovac train station in May 1917. They even were capable to invade the Old Bulgarian territory burning down the small town of Bosilegrad. It was obvious, that regular troops were not suited to fight the mobile guerilla units which used the classic hit and run tactics. The Bulgarians turned to their own rich experience of guerilla warfare accumulated mainly in Macedonia. So, they brought the old and highly experienced guerilla units in order to form the so called counter *chetas*. The bringing of counter *chetas* was combined with severe measures against anyone suspected of having ties with the Serbian rebels. Such a person was to be shot on the spot, his house burnt down, property confiscated and family deported. In order to demoralize the rebels brutal repressions were mixed with several amnesties and softer conduct towards those who agreed to put down arms and collaborate. On the opposite side the demoralization of population and fear of Bulgarian reprisals limited almost to a minimum the support enjoyed before that by the Serbian *chetniks*. So, they resorted to violence on their own towards the local population. In such a way the Bulgarians managed to exploit the fear and demoralization succeeding even to attract some of the former *chetniks*. It was very important because using the knowledge of the collaborators Bulgarians managed to almost completely crash the resistance movement by the end of 1917.

## **Conclusions**

The Serbian historians never fail to point out that the uprising was one of the few popular uprisings during the First World War such the Irish and Arab revolts and the only one in an

occupied country. However we propose that it is much more useful to analyze the uprising not just within the framework of First World War and not just with the strict borders between the occupiers and freedom fighters. It is also deeply rooted within the Balkan tradition of guerrilla warfare, the various *chetniks* movements and paramilitary bands (*chetas*, *komitadziis* and so on) operating in the region long before the uprising. The uprising was a complex phenomenon combining modern and archaic features. It was commanded by regular and reserve Serbian and Montenegrin officers but had also the characteristics of a peasant revolt against what was seen as corrupt and unjust government. Apart from the leadership, the rank and file consisted of peasants, local leaders, deserted soldiers and even former brigands who became brigands with a cause. The local population was caught between the brutal nationalizing effort of Bulgarian authorities, the fear of physical repression and deportation on one hand, and the stern dedication of Serbian *chetniks* to continue fighting even when it was obvious that there were no chances to achieve final success. Of course the power of a single *cheta*, no matter how it brave could be, was no match to the opportunities possessed by a regular heavily armed regular killing force.

The Bulgarian policy in Morava district was outright brutal from the very beginning. To certain point it was based on the presumption that Serbia had been once and for all wiped out of the political map of Europe. Whatever the future of Serbian lands under Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria intended to hold what it got, or better to say, to make this lands Bulgarian by any means possible.

The Bulgarians were so determined that actually the misconduct and atrocities in Morava region were not a secret for certain part of Bulgarian political establishment and public opinion. Bulgarian parliament openly discussed the problem. After the war many Bulgarian officers were charged with war crimes accusations mainly for their conduct in Morava area. In such a way the Bulgarian political elite during the war and immediately after its end was much more familiar with the events than Bulgarians are today after decades of silence.