

WAS BULGARIA OCCUPIED AFTER WORLD WAR I, OCTOBER 1918 – AUGUST 1920?

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The military defeat of the Bulgarian army in mid-September 1918 at Dobro pole in Macedonia and the subsequent disintegration of the defence lines, combined with the mutiny of the soldiers, retreating to the old state borders, forced the government of Alexander Malinov to hold a Crown Council in Sofia on September 25th and to convince the opposing generals and King Ferdinand, that the country should appeal to the HQ of the Oriental Army of the Entente in Salonica for a cease-fire and an armistice, thus effectively bringing the country out of the Great war. At once a delegation was appointed, headed by Minister Andrei Liapchev, to establish contacts with the enemy through the American consul in Sofia Dominic Murphy and sign the armistice. After one day long negotiations, the armistice was signed at 23:00 h on September 29th and came into force the next day at noon. It consisted of two instruments: a *Military Convention regulating the condition of Suspension of Hostilities between the Allied Powers and Bulgaria* and a *Secret Convention*.¹

While the former established the cessation of military activities, the demobilization of the Bulgarian army and transfer of weapons, munitions and military material, the latter dealt with more delicate matters, concerning the immediate future of the country that was surrendering to the Entente. Directly connected to the problem of occupation was article 2 of the Secret Convention. It read: “*A certain number of places of strategic importance on Bulgarian territory would be occupied by the Principal Allied Powers. This occupation shall be only temporary and shall serve only as a guarantee. It shall not give the right to forceful actions or compulsory requisitions. The General Commandant of the Allied armies pledges that unless special circumstances occur, Sofia shall not be occupied.*”² This text, as well as the two conventions as a whole, clearly indicates that Bulgaria was not surrendering unconditionally and that not the whole of the country would be

¹ Л. Огнянов. Войнишкото въстание, 1918. С., 1988, р. 164–167.

² В. Георгиев и Ст. Трифонов. История на българите в документи, т. 2 (1912–1918), с. 734.

systematically occupied, but only “a certain number of places of strategic importance”. At the same time the future occupation was to be carried out only by the troops of the Principal Allied Powers, thus excluding the neighbouring countries.

The same general notion was input into the previous article, which postulated that the eventual transportation of the Entente troops through Bulgarian territory and the usage of Bulgarian roads, railways, ports and rivers would be the subject of a special convention to be negotiated between the Bulgarian government and the High Command of the Oriental army and that the negotiations were to start no later than on October 8th. That convention would deal also with the control over the Bulgarian telephones, telegraphs and wireless telegraphs.³ In general the conditions of the armistice were always qualified as “heavy” and “cruel”, but the experienced King Ferdinand, when introduced to them reacted: “This is a success! I have expected far worse.”⁴ Indeed, even an incomprehensive but impartial comparison of the conditions of the armistices with the defeated countries, clearly shows that those with Bulgaria are shorter as numbers and not at all heavy. The explanation of that peculiarity has to deal not with traditions and historic precedence but with the brutal reality of World War I and the tactics of the Entente governments on one hand and the current international laws of war on the other.

The armistice with Bulgaria was the first one to be signed at the end of the Great War and was composed on the spot with a little time to explore all the possibilities. At that time there was not a sample, prepared in advance, to be used and modified according to the specific situation. In comparison, every next armistice was far longer and far more comprehensive. In some aspects the Salonica armistice later played the role of such sample, although one can hardly find direct similarities between it and even the first of the three subsequent armistices with Germany. So, inexperience may be part of the explanation.⁵

At the same time the Entente was in urgent need to demonstrate to the Central Powers that it was convinced to bring the war to a victorious end, but was trying to encourage the disagreements between Berlin and Vienna and to knock out

³ Ibidem.

⁴ В. Пасков. Абдикацията на цар Фердинанд. С., 1993, р. 22.

⁵ G. Terrail. Les negociations secretes et les quatre armistices. Paris., 1918.

of the war the Central Powers one by one. Bulgaria was the only genuine nation state among them and was the smallest and the weakest member of the alliance. A gracious and benevolent armistice with Sofia could not endanger the continuation of the Entente's military activities neither on the Western, nor on the Balkan fronts. At the same time it would encourage Istanbul and Vienna to reexamine their will to fight and reconsider their loyalty to Berlin. That is another consideration in the comparative analysis of the armistices. Because of the quick collapse of the Central Powers, those specific characteristics of the Sallonica armistice were never respected by the Entente troops in Bulgaria.

The international laws of the war set some limits to the activities of the Entente armies. They were gradually formulated in the last three decades of the 19th century through the Brussels declaration of August 27th 1874, the Oxford manual of the laws and customs of war of 1880 and the first Hague conference of May 18th – July 29th 1899. The rules of occupation were finally negotiated during the second Hague conference, June 15th – October 18th, 1907. The occupation was defined in Section 3, named *Military authority over the territory of the hostile state* in Protocol 4:

Art. 42. Territory is considered occupied when it is actually placed under the authority of the hostile army.

The occupation extends only to the territory where such authority has been established and can be exercised.

Art. 43. The authority of the legitimate power having in fact passed into the hands of the occupant, the latter shall take all the measures in his power to restore, and ensure, as far as possible, public order and safety, while respecting, unless absolutely prevented, the laws in force in the country.⁶

In those limits the occupying powers should respect the customary law of war that was internationally agreed upon and was not incorporated in any formal treaties.

On October 15th the Entente troops reached Sofia and in a week the whole country was under their control. For the contemporaries it was an unquestionable

⁶ <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instreet/1907c.html>

occupation and as such it was described both in the newspapers and in the memoirs.⁷ The attitude of the Bulgarians was completely negative, not only on the part of the pro-German political circles,⁸ but also on the part of those, that had backed the pro-Entente orientation of the country during the war years. The descriptions were usually of that kind: *“On the weakened body of the country colourfull African and Asian tribes were advancing like parasites, in English, French and Italian uniforms...”*⁹

In spite of that, on September 20th, 1919 an agreement was signed between the Commandant of the Oriental armies of the Entente in Bulgaria General Claudel and the financial minister St. Danev about the maintenance costs.¹⁰ It resulted in the resignation of the first Head of the Direction of State Guaranteed Debts T. Stoyanov.¹¹

The qualification of “occupants” was often used even concerning the staff of the Inter-Allied Control Commission that was consulting the Bulgarian governments in connection of reparations and other fiscal problems. It is accepted also in the modern Bulgarian historiography.¹² Little by little with the withdrawal of the Entente forces after the Peace treaty of Neuilly-sur-Seine was signed and enacted the memories of the occupations began to fade. Still in the treaty the sense of occupation was reinforced by article 133:

“There shall be paid by Bulgaria the total cost of all armies of the Allied and Associated Governments occupying territory within her boundaries, as defined in the present Treaty, from the date of the signature of the Armistice of September 29, 1918, until the coming into force of the present Treaty, including the keep of men and beasts, lodging and billeting, pay and allowances, salaries and wages, bedding, heating, lighting, clothing, equipment, harness and saddlery, armament

⁷Гр. Чешмеджиев. Политически спомени, С., 1988, р. 152; К. Кацаров. 60 години живяна история, С., с.а., р. 245.

⁸ П. Пешев. Исторически събития и деятели от навечерието на Освобождението ни до днес с бележки за живот ми, С., 1993, р. 596–599.

⁹ П. Нейков. Спомени, С., 1990, р. 242.

¹⁰ Central State Archive – Sofia (later ЦДА), ф. 284к, оп. 1, а.е. 4101, л. 2.

¹¹ ЦДА, ф. 173к, оп. 3, а.е. 1633, л. 1–4.

¹² Е. Стателова, Ст. Грънчаров. История на Нова България, 1878–1944, С., 1999, р. 326–327.

and rolling stock, air services, treatment of sick and wounded, veterinary and remount services, transport services of all sorts (such as by rail, sea or river, motor lorries), communications and correspondence, and, in general, the cost of all administrative or technical services, the working of which is necessary for the training of troops and for keeping their numbers up to strength and preserving their military efficiency.

The cost of such liabilities under the above heads, so far as they relate to purchases or requisitions by the Allied and Associated Governments in the occupied territory, shall be paid by the Bulgarian Government to the Allied and Associated Governments in any legal currency of Bulgaria. In cases where an Allied or Associated Government, in order to make such purchases or requisitions in the occupied territory, has incurred expenditure in a currency other than Bulgarian currency, such expenditure shall be reimbursed in Bulgarian currency at the rate of exchange current at the date of reimbursement, or at an agreed rate.

All other of the above costs shall be paid in the currency of the country to which the payment is due.” This debt of occupation received top priority among the other payments that were imposed on the country and which, in their turn were given priority over the pre-war payments.¹³ The article closely followed the respective text of the Versailles treaty, but was modified with a final term, i.e. the ratification and coming into force of the treaty after the obstructions expressed by the delegation and the government of Bulgaria. The central of them were that:

1) there had not been an official announcement of the beginning of the occupation;

2) no convention was signed with the government in Sofia, considering the period of occupation and the territorial extensivity of it, neither of the number of the occupying troops;

3) the requisitions, that were specifically outlawed by the Hague convention of 1907, were carried out with the Entente commanders issuing fiscal documents on the spot.¹⁴

¹³ The text in: <http://www.gwpda.org/1918p/neuilly2.html>, art. 133 and 135.

¹⁴ В. Ганев. Дневник, С., 2005, р. 208; ЦДА, ф. 173к, оп. 3, а.е. 2070, л.. 597ф.

As the peace treaty was enacted on August 9th, 1920, that was universally considered as the last day of the Entente`s occupation of the country.

The question of the occupation was raised again in the spring of 1923 during the negotiations about a new and effective reparation settlement between the Inter-Allied Commission and the Agrarian government of Al. Stamboliyski according to the general scheme of the Reparation Commission in Paris. The claims of the Entente quickly escalated from 150 to 300 million gold French francs. The urge was intensified after the reparation agreement of March 21st, 19123 as the priority of payment of the debt of occupation was higher than that of the reparations and the Commission declared that the agreement should be reached before the first reparation installment to be made by the Bulgarian government on October 1st.¹⁵ At the same time the Serbian government claimed about half a million Serbian dinars for the preliminary occupation of the region of Strumitza, but the claim was denounced by the Inter-Allied Commission in Sofia.¹⁶

The Bulgarian position was based upon the position of the delegation at the Paris Peace conference. The government produced authentic documents of the Oriental Army, which clearly indicated that the headings and the stamps bearing the inscription “*Commandment de l`Armee d`Occupation en Bulgarie*” were used only for a couple of days and were replaced, following the official protests of the government with “*Commandment de l`Armee d`Orient en Bulgarie*”. The HQ of the army managed to produce another unique document that supported the position of the government. It turned out that in March 1919 a British General informed the Bulgarian government that the port of Varna on the Black sea would be occupied, because of the intensified Bolshevik propaganda. After the Bolshevik activities were suppressed, the same General informed the government that the lawful Bulgarian authorities could be reinstalled. A lot more Entente documents were provided with the change of the headings, signed by General Maurice Claudel and General Franchet d`Esperey.¹⁷ It turned out that Bulgaria had already payed about 70 million gold francs for the upkeep of the occupation troops according to the Convention Claudel-Danev from 1919.

¹⁵ ЦДА, ф. 378к, оп. 1, а.е. 601, л. 1-3.

¹⁶ Archiv Jugoslavije – Belgrade, f. 339, fasc. 77, Reg. E/14.1923.

¹⁷ ЦДА, ф. 378к, оп. 1, а.е. 582, л. 19, 33-61.

The Bulgarian obstructions were reasonable, well documented and were based on international law. That was recognized by the ambassadors of the Entente in Sofia and by the delegates in the Inter-Allied Commission, and were met with understanding and even with support most of all in the British government. That altered the position of the Reparation Commission and of the Conference of the Ambassadors in Paris. The decision of the ambassadors was a reflection of their doubts. They accepted that the total occupation of the country was irrelevant and Bulgaria was in its right to address the Courts of Arbitration according to the peace treaty. At the same time they insisted on a nonbinding initial payment of 500 thousand gold francs before the first reparation installment and transferred the hot potato in the hands of the Inter-Allied Commission in Sofia.¹⁸ At the same time the Communist mutiny in September 1923 postponed the negotiations on the debt of occupation.

Since the beginning of November, however the negotiations were reopened. After deliberating on the two positions, on February 1st, 1924 the Inter-Allied Commission proposed its scheme of payment: 25 million gold francs in equal installments for 20 years with a 2,25 % interest, which would amount to a total of 31 183 490 gold francs. Bulgaria proposed 8 years of equal installments of 1 920 thousand gold francs that would amount to 30 639 596 gold francs. Italy's priority to all Bulgarian payments was lifted for the debt of occupation.¹⁹

The agreement was signed on March 28th, 1924. The 25 million gold francs were to be paid in equal installments for ten years with an interest rate of 5% totaling to 31 476 663 gold francs. The first annuity would be 2,5 million, the second – 3 million and the next six – 4 million. The last two of the installments would be of 1 million gold francs.²⁰ That agreement was highly appreciated by both sides and was acclaimed even in the British House of Lords.²¹

¹⁸ Ibidem, ф. 378к, оп. 1, а.е. 582, л. 70–77, а.е. 1147, л. 1.2.

¹⁹ Arhiv Jugoslavije, f. 388, fasc. 9, fol. 243; ЦДА, ф. 378к, оп. 1, а.е. 582, л. 87–130.

²⁰ Държавен вестник, № 36/15.05.1924; Д. Вачков. Дълговият проблем на България в годините след Първата световна война, 1918–1925. – In: История на външния държавен дълг на България, 1878–1990, vol. 2, С., 2006, p. 44.

²¹ Hansard (ed.), House of Commons Debates, vol. 57, p. 313–319.

The execution of the Convention quickly became a routine fiscal procedure. The due sums were transferred on monthly base in the “B” account of the Inter-Allied Commission from the coffers and twice a year on March 1st and on September 1st the Commission was responsible for sending the sums in the bank accounts of the financial ministries of Britain, France and Italy in several American banks.²² Thus Bulgaria became an integral part in the popular international triangular transfer of money: loans – peace treaties payments – war debts.

Several alterations on the general principals of the peace treaties payments occur in the meanwhile. According to the treaties every single kind of payment was on its own and there was no connection between them established. In spite of that gradually with the assistance of the Conference of the Ambassadors and the approval of the Entente governments the reparation Commission in Paris usurped the powers to deal with all fiscal transfers and payments in kind. That was followed by the special principle on the inclusive nature of the reparations payment in the *Report of the Commission of Experts to the Reparation Commission* which enacted the Dawes plan in August 1924. According to it all kinds of payments were merged within the reparation payment, but in separate bank accounts.²³ At the same time the alterations of the Bulgarian scheme of reparation payments in 1928 and 1929 did not affect the payments in its debt of occupation.

When the Young Committee of Experts met, they established that by October 1st, 1929 Bulgaria had paid 68 205 400 gold francs according to the Convention of 1919 and 19,5 million gold francs according to the Convention of March 1924.²⁴ Curiously enough, the Bulgarian figures were a bit smaller. The decisions were finalized at the second Hague Conference on reparations in January 1930. Following the general logic of the development of all payments, imposed by the Versailles system and the pivotal German example, the Bulgarian debt of occupation was merged with the reparations and was actually abolished.²⁵

²² ЦДА, ф. 258к, оп. 1, а.е. 3002, р. 1-2; ф. 378к, оп. 2, а.е. 583, р. 1-31.

²³ Ibidem, ф. 378к, оп. 1, а.е. 2156, р. 1-2; ф. 769к, оп. 2, а.е. 68, р. 1-4.

²⁴ Ibidem, ф. 258, оп. 1, а.е. 3821, р. 60.

²⁵ Демократически сговор, № 1881; ЦДА, ф. 258к, оп. 1, а.е. 3822, р. 97-120; оп. 5, а.е. 85, р. 33-49.

The story of the Bulgarian debt of occupation after World War I is a perfect illustration of the functioning of the Versailles system. It was very flexible when it considered the interests of the Entente and very firm and rigid towards its ex-enemy countries. It pretended to be integral and based upon the international law, but at the same time, all decisions were made on purely political grounds and often in contradiction with the existing multilateral treaties. It affirmed the concept that the rules of law (Jus in Bello) were only a cover of the brutal reality that law originates from power and power could not be restricted by law.