

Power and Influence in South-Eastern Europe

16th – 19th century

edited by

Maria Baramova, Plamen Mitev,
Ivan Parvev and Vania Racheva

LIT

Aleksandar Rastović

British Diplomats about Russian Influence in Serbia in the Nineteenth Century

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between Serbia and the United Kingdom in 1837 and the sending of the first British consul to Serbia, Colonel Hodges, a continuous interest of British politics in Serbia had been whether the impact of Imperial Russia was increasing or decreasing, whether the Serbian people were Russophile in their orientation, whether there were, on the territory of the Principality, and later of the Kingdom of Serbia, activities of secret Russian emissaries encouraging Pan-Slavic companies and organizations, as well as whether changes might occur in the pro-Austrian foreign policy of Milan Obrenović and its replacement with a Russophile stream. For all the British consuls and later representatives in Belgrade, a particular concern was that the influence of Russia did not cross a dangerous limit that could imperil British interests on the Balkans and further afield in the Middle East. Such an attitude on the part of British politics was conditioned by its Russophobia, i.e. by its assumption that all Slavic peoples, especially the South Slavs because of their historical, spiritual and religious ties with the Russians, were a priori exponents of Russian policy on the Balkans.

Otherwise, the phenomenon of British Russophobia is vividly shown by the historian John Gleason in his remarkable study, *The Genesis of Russophobia in Great Britain*. According to him, Russophobia is a paradox in the history of Great Britain that was followed by antipathy towards Russia at the beginning of the nineteenth century and which soon became the most prominent and most constant element of British reality.¹ Gleason saw the causes of the chronic British Russophobia in the rivalry of imperial ambitions on the same territory (the Middle East); or in the different approaches to solving the Eastern Question; and then in economic rivalries. Important were the party rivalries between the Whigs and the Tories that transferred their own internal conflicts to the field of foreign policy. The emergence of Russophobia in British society was influenced by the local political figures and a hostile press, which published numerous articles full of prejudices about Russia and the Russians.² Regarding the timeline of this phenomenon, Gleason believes that Russophobia in Britain developed in the third decade of the nineteenth century, acquired its final shape during the fourth decade of the same century and culminated during the Crimean War.³

1 John Gleason, *The Genesis of Russophobia in Great Britain: A Study of the Interaction of Policy and Opinion*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard UP 1950, p. 1.

2 *Ibid.*, pp. 284–6.

3 *Ibid.*

During the nineteenth century, and especially after the Berlin Congress, British policy on the Balkans and Serbia was carried out in accordance with three basic principles of British foreign policy. Primarily, this was a commitment to maintaining the status quo on the Balkans: it was the system of relations established at the Berlin Congress that in practice meant the prevention of Russian influence in the region and the prevention of St. Petersburg from having any future role in solving the Eastern Question. Disabling Russian expansion and Pan-Slavism on the Balkans because of the constant fear of the considerable Russian influence and the reputation of Russia's policy among the Balkan peoples and newly-recognized states was the second postulate of British Balkan politics. Preventing the formation of a federation or alliance of the Balkan states and peoples, the creation of which would revise the decision of the Berlin Treaty and change not only the political map of the Balkans, but also the newly-established balance of power among the Great Powers was the third principle of the British policy towards the Balkans and Serbia.

For British foreign policy it was important whether and to what extent Serbia respected the decisions of the Congress of Berlin and whether it advocated maintaining the *fait accompli* or was a potential destroyer of peace. The concern for the Treaty of Berlin was particularly visible during the first few years after the end of the Congress and the most notable example of concern in this regard are the reports of Britain's Vice-Consul Augustus Becker on the difficult position of minorities, especially the Jews and Muslims in Niš. On the basis of the reports one could conclude that Serbia did not comply with the commitments made at the Congress regarding the protection of minority rights.⁴ Otherwise, in the political life of Great Britain there was consensus on the part of both the Conservatives and Liberals that the position on the Balkans negotiated in Berlin had to be maintained in accordance with the decisions taken at the time.

All changes in Serbian politics – from the change of rulers to the change of governments and politicians – were evaluated in the Foreign Office from the standpoint of whether these changes could affect the decisions of the Congress of Berlin and which extend they could be contrary to Britain's strategic interests. Therefore, the United Kingdom put pressure on the Serbian government at every hint of change so that the changes could be avoided, postponed or, if they could not be stopped, limited to a minimum so as to cause as little inconvenience and as few difficulties as possible in the implementation of the Berlin Treaty.

A key point in the British policy towards Serbia in the nineteenth century was a constant obsession with Russian expansion and the need to prevent Russia's influence in the region, as well as fear of the Pan-Slavic movement. From 1837 on, Britain monitored closely whether Russian influence in Serbia was growing weaker or stronger; and whether Pan-Slavic agents operated on its territory. To London, Serbia and the Serbian people were and continued to be a tool clear in Russian hands, an outpost of the Russian breach on the Balkans; an exponent of Russian

4 Aleksandar Rastović, *Velika Britanija i Srbija*. Beograd: Istorijski institut 2000, p. 80.

politics. The obsession of the British public with Russia was vividly presented by Lord Salisbury, who claimed that the earlier Pope-phobia in British society and politics had been replaced by Russophobia. According to him, it was the result of the need of British society for a "spiritual spectre, a ghost that mobilizes it to defend the interests of Turkey in the same way it defended its interests against the Vatican."⁵

The constantly present Russophobia in British politics and the awareness of the closeness of Russia and Serbia led to its great suspicion and fear of each step undertaken in Belgrade. In London, the attitude of the Serbian government to the Pan-Slavic movement in the country and the Balkans was carefully listened to. Great Britain supported the opposition of King Milan to Pan-Slavism and his policy of poor relations with Russia. British emissaries in Belgrade put a special emphasis on keeping an eye on information about a renewal of Pan-Slavic committees in Serbia. Thus, Gerald Francis Gould, a Minister Resident, on March 15th 1881 reported to George Granville, the Head of the Foreign Office, that the committees were controlled by General Chernaev, who had been in Serbia for a few months, officially in order to ensure the railway concession, but according to his information the Russian general had had the task of stirring up political intrigues against Prince Milan in the name of the Moscow Pan-Slavic committee.⁶ The British emissary informed his government that in mid-April of the same year the Russian general was staying in Serbia again⁷.

When the 1882 uprising broke out in Herzegovina, the British government feared possible actions by Pan-Slavists in Serbia wanting to help their brothers in the area. Thus, Sidney Locock, the Minister Resident, informed the Foreign Office on 20th May 1882 that the Serbian authorities had stopped a convoy of guns in Čačak which were being smuggled from Bulgaria to Bosnia. The convoy was accompanied by sixty Montenegrins 'armed to the teeth' and under the command of Stefan Lukic Jovanovic, the former Russian officer who had been expelled from the army, and Jovan Popovic Lipovac, who had had a similar fate.⁸ Locock received reliable information that the Bulgarian government had sold seven thousand rifles to the Russian Pan-Slavic committee for the needs of the rebels in Herzegovina.

British politics was interested in the attitude of the Serbian monarch to the Pan-Slavic movement, although it had the information that he was not fond of it. Milan clearly stated his opinion about the Pan-Slavic movement in an interview with Sidney Locock on 26th February 1882. On that occasion he expressed his most determined opposition to the Pan-Slavism propagated by Russia on the Balkans. He accused the Russian Pan-Slavic emissaries of sowing seeds of discord everywhere.⁹ For him, Pan-Slavism was dangerous also because he believed that Russia intended to remove

5 Milorad Ekmecić, *Stabilnost Balkana i Srbi*. In: *Evropa na raskršću. Novi židovi ili Ujedinjena Evropa*. Beograd: Istorijski institut 1999, p. 51.

6 Foreign Office, 105/17, Gould to Granville, Belgrade, March 15, 1881. (further F. O.)

7 F. O. 105/17, Gould to Granville, Belgrade, April 19, 1881.

8 F. O. 105/32, Gould to Granville, Belgrade, May 20, 1882.

9 F. O. 105/32, Locock to Granville, Belgrade, February 2, 1882.

him from the throne through the Pan-Slavic circles. In the years that followed, British diplomats kept on tracking Pan-Slavic activities. On 3rd February 1888, the emissary George Hughes Wyndham wrote that the printing of the Pan-Slavic newspaper "Velika Srbija" (Great Serbia) was started in Belgrade; its publication was supported by the Russian embassy in Belgrade and Pan-Slavic committees.¹⁰ In addition to the government's being concerned about the revival of Pan-Slavism, the British press often wrote about the strong Pan-Slavic movement in Serbia. After the victory of the Radicals in the Parliament elections on 19th September 1883, the "Times" published an article which expressed the fear that the victory of Serbian radicalism would threaten the state of Serbia and its noble idea, one that had always striven for the greatness and independence of Serbia. From the pages of this newspaper there came a warning about the fact that Serbian Radicals were representatives of Pan-Slavic agitation, whereas Pan-Slavism and the Serbian idea were not only different, but mutually exclusive. That was why, in the opinion of the editorial board, the fear that the triumph of the radicals marked the victory of Radical Pan-Slavic agitation over the Great Serbian Idea was reasonable.¹¹

The facts indicate that the Serbian sovereign's relationship with the Russian authorities was not a good one. It was a crucial point for British politics in its determination to support him and develop good relations with Serbia. Russia was unable to overcome the remarkable inclination of the Serbian king towards Austria-Hungary and was often involved in the numerous campaigns of Milan's enemies and in organizing conspiracies against him. The report sent to the Foreign Office by Locock on 11th October 1883 was interesting and described a meeting with King Milan in detail. On that occasion the monarch complained about the hostile attitude of Russia towards him and the secret work of Russian policy on demolishing the Berlin Treaty provisions and his government:

Russia is still secretly working to achieve its ultimate goal and whatever the difficulties in store for it, does everything to remove them; and the Berlin Treaty is the current obstacle. Since the moment when its authorized representatives left the Congress of Berlin, its goal has been to attempt to replace the treaty by the Treaty of San Stefano... At present, Russia is operating on the Balkan Peninsula, especially in Bulgaria and here. It has personal reasons to have the country as an instrument and also wants to get rid of me because I do not want to be its servant ... Russia will never forgive me. Rarely can I buy Russian newspapers without reading that I need to be removed and replaced by Karadjordjević.¹²

On that occasion, the king reiterated his stance that he would not work under instructions from Russia and would rather trust Austria-Hungary, that in his opinion "is not driven by the desire to eat us like Russia."¹³ He also strongly believed that Russia was using the Radicals to eliminate him from the throne.

10 F. O. 105/67, Wyndham to Salisbury, Belgrade, February 3, 1888.

11 Videlo, Nr. 114, 28. Septembar 1883.

12 F. O. 105/40, Locock to Granville, Belgrade, October 11, 1883.

13 *Ibid.*

The constant fear of British politics regarding a possible rapprochement between Serbia and Russia proved to be justified, as was supported by a report made by Locock on 15th July 1883 which stated that King Milan had authorized Jovan Marinović to use his presence at the coronation of the new Russian Tsar in Moscow to convey to the Russian government his desire to improve relations between the two countries. Marinović's mission ended without success, because the Russian side had asked for much more than empty and solemn promise. It is interesting that the historian Slobodan Jovanović believes that this mission represented an attempt by the Serbian king to deceive Russia with beautiful words.¹⁴ In the same report Locock presented his assessment that the policy of Russia would not change and that it would continue to be directed against the Serbian king and government.¹⁵

The British suspicion of Russia's good intentions in relation to Serbia was also shown during the stay of a large group of Russian surgeons in Belgrade during the Serbian-Bulgarian War. In his reports from 6th January and 23rd April 1886 Wyndham informed London that the purpose of their presence was of a political nature, i.e. that they used their stay for the insertion of Russian agents into the country as well as for the return of Russian influence and the affinity of the Serbs for the Tsar.¹⁶ Wyndham predicted the bad relations between Serbia and Russia in the years that followed. On 5th July 1886 he met King Milan, who kept warning him of the renewed strengthening of Russian influence on the Balkans and Serbia, as well as of the Russian encouragement given to the conspiracy against him.

Wyndham's report about his conversation with King Milan on 23rd June 1887 speaks distinctly about the ongoing interest of British politics in the possible increase of Russian influence in Serbia. This meeting represented a sort of confession by the Serbian king and justification of certain actions. King Milan explained that the decision to appoint Jovan Ristić as new Prime Minister had been made because the country at that time was permeated with Russophilia and because he could no longer rely on the support of the army, which was sympathetic to revolution. This, however, did not change his commitment to Austria-Hungary with his "heart and soul."¹⁷ Great Britain kept receiving information from various sources that Russia was continuing to promote and organize a conspiracy against King Milan. This was supported by Wyndham in July 1887, when he warned London that Russia with the "help of Montenegrins encourages conspiracy against King Milan and wants to bring Prince Petar Karadjordjević to the Serbian throne".¹⁸

British representatives in Belgrade warned that a change of rulers in Serbia and increased influence of Russia on the Balkans could cause unforeseeable conse-

14 Slobodan Jovanović, *Vlada Milana Obrenovića*. Beograd: BIGZ 1990², p. 166.

15 F. O. 105/24, Locock to Granville, Belgrade, July 15, 1883.

16 F. O. 105/55, Wyndham to Salisbury, Belgrade, January 6, 1886, F. O. 105/56, Wyndham to Rosebery, Belgrade, April 23, 1886.

17 F. O. 105/63, Wyndham to Salisbury, Belgrade, June 23, 1887.

18 F. O. 105/56, Wyndham to Rosebery, Belgrade, July 5, 1886.

quences for the peace in the area.¹⁹ A change on the Serbian throne would also cause a change in the direction of Serbian foreign policy which was not in the interest of Great Britain; and that is why it followed very closely all the news about conspiracies against King Milan and his eventual abdication, using every moment to encourage and force him to give up the intention voluntarily to leave the throne.

The principle of preventing the creation of a wider community of the Balkan peoples adjoined the principle of respect for the existing situation on the Balkans and the prevention of Russian expansion. The British government followed Serbian ideas to form a federation, confederation or a confederacy of Balkan states. Official London was always reserved and looked upon attempts to link the Balkan peoples and states with distrust, as each union could create a change in the established balance of power in favour of Russia and undermine the interests of Britain. That is why the British emissaries in Belgrade regularly informed their superiors about this sensitive issue.

British policy towards Serbia throughout the nineteenth century was based on the fundamental principles of its Balkan policy. This policy is characterized by distrust for the Serbian state because of doubts regarding its sincere intention to respect the decisions of the Congress of Berlin in terms of maintaining the current situation on the Balkans. Great Britain feared increased Russian influence and the expansion of Russophile and Slavophile feelings in the Serbian people. The Serbs were considered a perpetrator of Russian policy on the Balkans, with Serbia as a possible *place d'armes* for the Russian breakthrough to Constantinople, even though at the time the official foreign policy of Serbia was very Austrophile and relations of the Serbian state and its rulers with Russia were at a very low level. That fact did not diminish the constant vigilance of the British government and its fear, amounting almost to panic, that there could be a rapprochement between Serbia and Russia. Almost all reports by British representatives in Serbia contain information about Russo-Serbian relations and the Pan-Slavic movement in Serbia.

British policy also looked with disapproval upon all other efforts of King Milan and Serbian politicians to form a union of Balkan states, despite the fact that these plans were supposed to have the Turkish Sultan at the forefront of the union. All ideas about Balkan federations clashed with the British policy of maintaining the current situation on the Balkans, regulated by the provisions of the Berlin Congress. Strategically speaking, almost throughout the nineteenth century the Serbian state and national interests were in conflict with the objectives of British policy on the Balkans, although the ruler of Serbia after the Congress of Berlin was an ardent Austrophile who as such indirectly worked on actualization of the British policy on the Balkans.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*