

Antonello BIAGINI & Andrea CARTENY*

A CLOSE RELATIONSHIP:
ITALY AND MONTENEGRO AFTER 1878

ABSTRACT: The paper deals with the relations between Montenegro and Italy after Italian Risorgimento and international recognition of the Montenegrin independence 1878. There was emphasized the role of the Italian representatives Giuseppe Otolengi, member of the International commission for establishing the state's border according the decisions of the Congress of Berlin, and Cesare Durando, Italian diplomatic representative in Montenegro. Author also describes the sources in Italian archives for research of Italian-Montenegrin relations from 1878. until second half of XX century.

KEY WORDS: Italy, Montenegro, prince Nikola, Giuseppe Otolengi, Cesare Durando

Montenegro and its people were crucial in the foreign policy of Italy after the national Unification: the roots of this relations laid in long term links with Venetia and in the role of Montenegro as stronghold of resistance to Ottoman rule in Balkans since mid 19th Century. In fact, the brief and bloodshed "spring of people" in 1849-1849 posed a serious challenge to the long-standing domain of multinational empires in Europe. Although the Ottomans were not directly affected by the 1848 revolutions, the Turkish rule increasingly declined ever since. The rise of nationalities in Balkans is a part of larger European phenomenon and belongs to European history. Identity and national conscience were defined through the anti-Ottoman struggle for independence. Movements of national uprising started to act against Turks in the whole Balkan region: Serbian, Romania, Bulgaria, Montenegro. The cultural premise of this new kind of national consciousness was often a quasi

* Autori su profesori istorijskih nauka na univerzitetu La Sapienza u Rimu i univerzitetu Teramo.

mythological memory of a “great” past of an ancient incarnation of the country. Myths and propaganda of a “Great Serbia” or “Great Bulgaria” inflamed the cultural and military fight against the Ottoman Empire. As the great dynasties declined, the emergence of national programs changed the political landscape of Balkans. As the Turkish rule faded, Western Powers and Russia showed a greater interest to gain influence in the region.

After the Crimea’s War (often called “Oriental” or “Russian War”) and the Paris Congress of 1856, Prince Danilo requested for Montenegro a special status modelled on Romanian principalities: he did not obtain it but the Montenegro’s question (as the Italian one) surfaced again on the Great Powers table along the next two decades. Since 1857 Montenegro was committed in supporting Bosnian insurgents against Turks: and the Oriental crisis of 1875-1876 marked a turning point in the history of Adriatic and Balkan region. With the consent of Serbia, Principedom of Montenegro declared war to Turkey in July 1876 in support of Bosnian insurgency. After the signing of an armistice in November 1876, as Russia declared war to the Ottoman Empire, Montenegro restarted the hostilities. The victory brought new territories to Montenegro, even if his territorial gains (firstly previewed by San Stefano treaty) were reduced by the Berlin Congress¹.

After the crisis of 1878, Austria-Hungary, Russia, Imperial Germany, Italy and France were competing to replace the Ottoman Empire as most influential power in the region. Austria-Hungary, with the Bosnia-Herzegovina occupation, attempted to establish a new regional hegemony: so the national struggle of the new-born States became necessarily anti-Austrian. The definition of the new borders became the main issue in Balkans from 1878 to the onset of 1st World War: but borders were hard to be defined given the mixed ethnic configuration of the region. Italy as minor power with strong ties in the region played a crucial role in the borders question. In the Imperial Age of a new equilibrium based on Germany (even if built by an European “concert” which was not able to achieve the so-called “European Civilization’s mission”²) emerged a growing role of minor powers and young nations struggling for their independence: and Italy was a model of self-determination and National process of Unity.

In fact, in the Italian General Staff Historical Archive³ were collected detailed relations and accounts not only on military affairs but on the social

¹ Cfr: A. Biagini, “La Questione d’Oriente del 1875-78 nei documenti dell’Archivio dell’Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore Esercito”, in *Memorie storiche militari*, Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito – Ufficio Storico, Roma 1978, pp. 353-386.

² Cfr: B. Croce, *Storia d’Europa nel secolo decimonono*, Bari-Roma (1932: first edition) 1965, p. 289.

³ In Italian that’s *Archivio dell’Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore Esercito* (AUSSME), located in Rome.

and historical development of people and States worth of Italian interests, in the sense of the building of the “overriding” (and not “permanent”) evident national interests⁴ on Adriatic area. Officers and military attaches reported a huge documentation with all kind of data about the populations and the territory of the region⁵: in our framework firstly Lieutenant Colonel Giuseppe Ottolenghi sent a report to the Commanding Officer of the General Staff on the Delimitation of Montenegro Borders⁶. This document contained the full details of difficult negotiations to implement on the ground the political decisions taken at the Berlin Congress. The negotiations were based on the Austrian map, already discussed and approved in Berlin: the Russian delegate opposed decisions on majority, asking for unanimity by other delegates; one more strong opposition came from the Turkish delegate, who was aware of the diminutions imposed on Ottoman Empire. In fact, changing his mind on the procedure, the Turkish delegate left the Commission after the first decision to be taken on majority. So the Commission was hence condemned to be inoperative from May to July 1879, when talks restarted (the Italian proposal to draw different and temporary border lines finally was accepted⁷). It’s true that the Berlin draft was extremely vague: there were no guiding principles in setting the borders (as nationalities, religions, races) and the Ottomans adopted a dilatory technique in order to slow the activity of the Commission. Russia sided with Montenegro while England supported Turks; France and Italy tried to remain neutral and impartial; Austria-Hungary, and consequently Germany, was pro-Turks: so Ottoman Empire counted on minimum half of delegates Commission⁸.

In the April 1881 one more document presented wisely not only the Army’s situation in Montenegro: written by the *chargé d’affaire* Cesare Durando, the report quoted the form of Foreign Affairs Minister full and described the Montenegro’s history and people⁹. After an analitic panorama on the

⁴ We agree with Federico Chabod about the so-called “permanent interests”, defined as “pure doctrinary abstraction”: cfr F. Chabod, “Prefazione”, in *Storia della politica estera italiana dal 1870 al 1896*, Roma-Bari (1951: first edition) 1965, pp. 10-11.

⁵ Cfr: A. Biagini, *Note e relazioni di viaggio nei Balcani (1879-1898)*, Roma 1979.

⁶ AUSSME, fondo G33 “Ufficio Coloniale”, b. 9, fasc. 79, “Rapporto della Commissione per la Delimitazione del Montenegro – Tenente Colonnello G. Ottolenghi”: Roma, 25 novembre 1879, pp. 1-16.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

⁸ “In conseguenza di ciò la Turchia si trovò sempre favorita. Infatti nelle *peggior ipotesi*, poteva sempre contare su quattro (Turchia, Inghilterra, Austria, Germania) degli otto voti. Il Montenegro, avendone sempre quattro contro, soltanto nella *migliore ipotesi* poteva contare sulla parità di voti: cioè quando l’Italia e la Francia non avevano motivi per schierarsi a favore delle idee della Turchia”: *ibidem*, p. 3.

⁹ AUSSME, b. cit., fasc. 81, “Rapporto sulle forze militari del Montenegro. Risposta al questionario per informazioni d’ordine militari e politico militari sul Montenegro trasmesso

history, territory, tribes and national behaviours, the Durando's observation by a political point of view was able to underline the possibility of a natural alliance against Austria between Italy and Montenegro. In the opinion of Montenegrins, Austria is hated for his traditional opposition against all the peoples struggling for their national Unity¹⁰. Within official data and diplomatic positions, the Ottolenghi's and Durando's reports made a complete description of the international context and of the Montenegro civilization, underlining the strength of some young peoples and nations, to have more and more importance in Balkans and Adriatic sea area¹¹.

Soldiers were often the front-runners of the skilled diplomatic approach of Italy in this "new" Europe. The Italian officers along four decades acted as military attaches, Chiefs of peacekeeping missions, border-drawers, Military advisers (Italy reorganized the Turkish gendarmerie, as in Macedonia¹²) and first and foremost diplomatic unofficial envoys of their country. In a world in turmoil, upset by uprisings and wars after four centuries of isolation, the Italian officers acted both as observers and as contributors to the resolutions of political and practical problems. The prestige of *Risorgimento* played a crucial role for the Italian national interest in the area: weaker Italy could count on a soft power of prestige, given its similarities with the new Balkan nations. History of Eastern Europe usually focused on wars and clash of nationalities, but post-war phases were important alike. The definition of the borders is not only a geographical issue but political as well. A meticulous and even frustrating work followed the Wars, after 1878 and 1912-1913: the Great Powers were too much involved for being impartial in the definition of the new borders¹³. Being a minor power plays in favour of Italy: since mid-19th the Kingdom of Sardinia offered assistance and volunteers to Greeks, Romanians and Serbs against the Turks. With the signing of the Triple Alliance with Austria-Hungary and Germany the Italian interest in Balkans became more vivid. The Italian General Staff is a major player in this inte-

con Dispaccio del R^o Ministero per gli Affari Esteri in data 19 febbraio 1881", C. Durando: Cettigne, aprile 1881, pp. 1-52.

¹⁰ "Ciò non pertanto vivissima in tutti i Montenegrini è l'animosità contro cotesto impero che ha per tradizione di mettersi a traverso al progresso delle unificazioni nazionali.", *ibidem*, p. 51, where it follows: "La potenza che si trovasse in guerra coll'Austria mediante un sussidio di denaro potrebbe sempre contare sul concorso del Montenegro".

¹¹ The Ottolenghi's and Durando's extraordinary testimonies are edited now in a new book: A. Biagini, A. Carteny, *All'origine dell'amicizia adriatica. Il Montenegro nel rapporto Ottolenghi (1879) e nella relazione Durando (1881)*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2010.

¹² Cfr: A. Biagini, "Italia e Turchia (1904-1911). Gli ufficiali italiani e la riorganizzazione della gendarmeria in Macedonia", in *Memorie Storiche Militari*, Stato Maggiore Esercito – Ufficio Storico, Roma 1977, pp. 207-228.

¹³ Cfr: A. Biagini, *Momenti di storia balcanica (1878-1914). Aspetti militari*, Ufficio storico SME, Roma 1981.

rest: Italian army considered the Balkans as a unity in political and strategic terms. The Balkans at the turn of the century were defined in Italian sources as „the Oriental Exchequer”. Although Austria was an ally, Italians thought of themselves as a counterbalance to Austria in the region. As the tension with Austria grew, States like Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Romania considered Italy as the opponent to the Austrian hegemony.

Concluding, we can say that, even though Italy was a quite new born State, struggling for its independence in the wars and political schemes of the *Risorgimento* era, since 1878 it started to show a foreign policy interest for its Eastern neighbours, as Montenegro. Italians were involved in Balkans, with diplomats, politicians, skilled workers and immigrants, and military cadres acting on the field. Reconstructing Italian foreign policy in Balkans from late 19th Century, until the Balkan Wars¹⁴ and (mainly for the Montenegro) the end of the First World War¹⁵, it was a big task of the Italian historians specialized in History of Eastern Europe. After in the Archive ordered all the files, now we're working with my research group¹⁶ to study all the Montenegro documentation (1878-1919), with the aim of his complete edition¹⁷ in cooperation with the friends and colleagues of the History Institute of Montenegro.

¹⁴ Cfr: A. Biagini, *L'Italia e le guerre balcaniche*, Ufficio storico SME, Roma 1990.

¹⁵ Cfr: A. Biagini, “I rapporti tra l'Italia e il Montenegro durante la Prima Guerra Mondiale, 1914-1918”, in *Rassegna Storica del Risorgimento*, Istituto per la storia del Risorgimento italiano, 68, nr 4/1981, pp. 443-458.

¹⁶ With the support of the Historical Office Chief Col. Antonino Zarcone and the preliminary work of the Archivist Dr Alessandro Gionfrida, we're going to publish the Montenegro's files in the Archive of the Historical Office – General Staff of Italian Army.

¹⁷ The Montenegro's files in AUSSME, are ordered in different periods and subjects, e.g.:

- from the Berlin Congress to the First World War (1878-1914), files by Italian Army *attachés* for Bulgaria and Montenegro and from the offices (*Uffici Scacchieri orientale e occidentale, Ufficio Coloniale*) of the General Quarter of the G State of the Army's General Staff;
- files about First World War (1914-1918), divided from July 1914 until May 1915 (with the Italian neutrality) and until the Great War's end;
- files about Montenegro and the end of his independence (1919): with documentation of - Supreme Command and Military Section of the Italian Delegation at Peace Conference of Paris.

Antonello BIAGINI & Andrea CARTENY

A CLOSE RELATIONSHIP:
ITALY AND MONTENEGRO AFTER 1878

Summary

In the second half of 19th Century, being a minor power plays in favour of Italy: since mid-19th the Kingdom of Sardinia offered assistance and volunteers to Greeks, Romanians and Serbs against the Turks. With the signing of the Triple Alliance with Austria-Hungary and Germany the Italian interest in Balkans became more vivid. The Italian General Staff is a major player in this interest: Italian army considered the Balkans as a unity in political and strategic terms. The Balkans at the turn of the century were defined in Italian sources as “the Oriental Exchequer”. Although Austria was an ally, Italians thought of themselves as a counterbalance to Austria in the region. As the tension with Austria grew, States like Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Romania considered Italy as the opponent to the Austrian hegemony. Even though Italy was a quite new born State, struggling for its independence in the wars and political schemes of the *Risorgimento* era, since 1878 it started to show a foreign policy interest for its Eastern neighbours, as Montenegro. Italians were involved in Balkans, with diplomats, politicians, skilled workers and immigrants, and military cadres acting on the field.