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D. NIKOLIĆ, Municipium Aelianum • S. ĆIRKOVIĆ, The Romani Language in the Linguistic Landscape of Serbia. A (non)visible Minority Language • K. POPEK, The Question of Christian Slavic Refugees and the Russian Occupation of the Principality of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia (1877–1879) • M. VOJINOVIĆ, Breaking the Isolation. Kingdom of Serbia and the Adriatic Railroad 1906–1908 • M. VIDENOVIĆ, The Outbreak of the First Balkan War and the Italo-Turkish Peace Negotiations in Lausanne in 1912 • A. NIKOLIĆ, The Promulgation of the 1910 Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina – the Imperial Framework • D. FUNDIĆ, Searching for the Viable Solution. Yugoslav and Czechoslovak Nation-Building Projects during the 1930s • M. LORENCCI, Tribes in Arms. Gjon Marka Gjoni and the Irregular and Paramilitary Volunteer Forces of Northern Albania during the Fascist Occupation (1939–1943) • A. STOJANOVIĆ, A Croatian and Catholic State. The Ustasha Regime and Religious Communities in the Independent State of Croatia • A. EDEMSKIY, “The Chivu Stoica Plan” (September 1957). A Step on the Road to the “Open Balkans” • A. BONIFACIO, “Death to the Slavs!” The Italian-Yugoslav Relations on Mutual Minorities and the Impact of the 1961 Trieste Disorders (1954–1964) ❧

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Breaking the Isolation Kingdom of Serbia and the Adriatic Railroad 1906–1908

Abstract: Between 1906 and 1908, the Kingdom of Serbia undertook a comprehensive diplomatic effort aimed at establishing a rail connection between the Danube and the Adriatic Sea. The article first provides a brief overview of the project's rationale. Following that, it delves into the positions of individual countries regarding the proposed initiative, covering those who offered financial and political support, as well as those who actively sought to thwart the project. Ultimately, the article points to a particular Balkan infrastructural predicament. The Adriatic Railroad project, despite obvious economic benefits, had international support above all because it had the potential to influence the balance of power in the region. This potential was, at the same time, the reason why the project had powerful opponents and why it eventually failed.

Keywords: Adriatic Railroad, railroads, infrastructure, Kingdom of Serbia, Great Power Politics.

Introduction

As Jürgen Osterhammel noted, “the nineteenth century became the age of the speed revolution”.¹ Indeed, it is hard to think of any aspect of life that was not affected by the construction of railroads. Movements of people and goods were changed forever. Railroads, as an invention, did not affect only the economy and migrations. It did not take long before it was obvious that the new technology affected the projection of power and military planning.² When great transcontinental railway projects were conceptualized and implemented for the first time, during the late 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, that time coincided with the emergence of geopolitics as a separate discipline. Nu-

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¹ J. Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 74.

² C. Wolmar, *Engines of War: How Wars Were Won & Lost on the Railways* (London: Atlantic Books, 2010), 13–33; G. Wawro, *The Franco–Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870–1871* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 47, 48, 84.

merous contemporary analyses pointed to the same region as crucial for global dominance. That region was Southwestern Asia, or as American naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan called it for the first time in 1902: The Middle East.³ The Balkans, a region in-between Asia Minor and Central Europe, was not just the location of a couple of last stations before the Orient Express reached Constantinople. It was the region that stood between the Middle East and the rest of Europe.

It was not only this that gave importance to the Balkans. It was a region where different national aspirations and different great power objectives overlapped. In other words, a change in the balance of power in the Balkans could affect a larger balance among the Great Powers. Lastly, the Balkans was an arena of the Russo-Austrian struggle for dominance.⁴ France and Britain were positioning themselves towards local issues in the context of their wider interests in Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean. From the 1870s onward, these complex relations additionally intensified with the arrival of the newly unified German Empire and Italy, who also had their visions and interests. Last but not least, the Ottoman Empire struggled to preserve its territories and prestige. All Great Powers were interested in every proposed infrastructure project. France, Russia, the Ottoman Empire, Great Britain, Austria-Hungary, Italy, and Germany paid attention to every project, proposal, or even discussion about future infrastructural ventures. It was generally understood that both access to and the geographical orientation of a newly constructed railroad could bolster both the political and the economic position in the region and diminish those of opponents. A railroad also opened opportunities for new military plans and faster movements of armies. If we look at Europe as a whole, before 1914, railroads had a crucial place in the war plans of all Great Powers.⁵

Bridging Markets: Serbia's Call for the Adriatic Railroad

When discussing big transcontinental projects, projects whose goal was nothing short of connecting Europe and Asia, it may look strange to focus on the construction plans of the Kingdom of Serbia, a small, undeveloped, landlocked Balkan country, which was chronically deprived both of capital and modern in-

³ R. Adelson, *London and the Invention of the Middle East: Money, Power, and Wars 1902–1922* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1995), 22.

⁴ For an overview of the Russo-Austrian struggle in the Balkans in the context of rail projects see: H. Jacolin, "Serbia's Access to the Sea 1830–2006". In *Eastern European Railways in Transition: Nineteenth to Twenty-first Centuries*, eds. Henry Jacolin, Ralf Roth, (London: Routledge, 2013), 69–76.

⁵ D. Stevenson, "War by Timetable? The Railway Race Before 1914", *Past & Present* 162 (1999), 163–194.

frastructure. However, this paper aims to show that this case study can indicate all the complexities of trans-regional and trans-continental transport, in its political, economic, and military context. Serbia, previously an autonomous province of the Ottoman Empire, became independent in 1878. The newly independent Balkan country had to fulfill several conditions to become internationally accepted as sovereign and independent. One of the conditions that the Great Powers set was that the Serbian government had to promise to build a railroad. Construction of the railroad became a condition *sine qua non* for Serbian independence. Serbia, thus, represents a unique example of a state which did not choose to build a railroad. It was obliged to do so. This was a desire of the Habsburg Empire for which the potential of not having a connection with the Ottoman Empire was not seen as a possibility. In the early 1880s, the first railroads were built in Serbia. Austria-Hungary took on itself the job of connecting Belgrade, the Serbian capital, with the Central European network of railroads. In a symbolic move, which encapsulated its influence in Serbia, the Habsburg Monarchy did not bring the rail to the border between the two countries, on the Sava River. Austrian engineers crossed the river and continued their work up until Belgrade. The Serbian government, with the help of foreign investors, had built railroads from Belgrade towards the border with the Ottoman Empire. One leg of these new railroads ended in Thessaloniki and the other in Constantinople.

Austria-Hungary was determined to have full domination over its new south-eastern neighbor. The Habsburg foreign minister Baron Heinrich Karl von Haymerle insisted that the Habsburg Monarchy had to have guaranteed “most-favored-nation status” in Serbia. In the early 1880s, with several trade treaties, Serbia’s economy became completely attached to Austro-Hungarian industry and trade. Moreover, Serbia agreed to have prior consultations with Vienna before conducting negotiations with any other government.⁶ The negotiating power of the Habsburg diplomats was not based purely on the military power of the Monarchy. It was strengthened by the fact that all existing railroads connecting Serbia with potential markets passed through Austria-Hungary. This gave the Hapsburg Empire powerful leverage.

With this in mind, diplomats from Vienna created another medium for pressuring Serbia. Starting from the 1881 trade treaty, the so-called “swine fever clause” allowed Austria-Hungary to close the border for Serbian products by proclaiming that Serbian livestock was infected. Without a doubt, the danger

⁶ J. G. Beaver, *Collision Course: Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, Serbia and the Politics of Preventive War* (Author’s edition, 2009), 67; A. C. Tuncer, *Sovereign Debt and International Financial Control: The Middle East and the Balkans 1870–1914* (London: Palgrave, 2015), 82; I. D. Armour, *Apple of Discord: The “Hungarian Factor” in Austro-Serbian Relations 1867–1881* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2014), 311.

of a disease was tangible. However, from the start, it was clear that this measure could be used as a political weapon. Whenever the Belgrade government was less amiable towards Vienna, news about unhealthy Serbian livestock resurfaced. In the coming years, the government in Vienna threatened, every now and then, that it would forbid Serbian export through its territories, which would, as it was believed, represent a crucial and fatal blow to the Serbian state finances. This situation continued for more than two decades.⁷ Serbia's leading elites were dissatisfied but had few other options.

In the first years of the 20th century, Serbian diplomacy took a bolder stance. In December of 1905, Austro-Hungarian diplomacy discovered that Serbia and neighboring Bulgaria had secretly negotiated a new trade deal. Even a customs union between Serbia and Bulgaria was a possibility at one point. This threatened not only the predominant position of Austrian merchandise in Serbia but also the prestige of the Monarchy in general. The government in Vienna considered that no other country, apart from itself, could have trade privileges of that kind in Serbia.⁸ What was not emphasized enough is the fact that the coming moves of the Habsburg diplomacy were also motivated by a desire to crush any Serbo-Bulgarian rail projects, which were already rumored in diplomatic circles.⁹

In January 1906, Austria-Hungary did something that Hungarian agrarian producers had requested for quite some time. The government in Vienna banned imports from Serbia. Moreover, Serbia could not export to other markets using the Austro-Hungarian rail network. It is important to note that depending on the year, almost 90 percent of Serbian exports had ended up in Austria-Hungary prior to this point.¹⁰ The Habsburg market was crucial for Serbia's economy, not just as a final destination, but also as a depot for trade with other European countries – because the bulk of the exports that did not

⁷ Between 1881 and 1906 the border was closed nine times. *Ibid.*, 295.

⁸ F. R. Bridge, *From Sadowa to Sarajevo: The Foreign Policy of Austria-Hungary 1866–1914* (London: Routledge, 1972), 277–279.

⁹ *Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv* (HHStA), PA XIX Serbien Kopie. Ad 3153/9; *HHStA*, Original. Telegramm № 15 AR, F 37, Serbien 3, K. 62. Both documents are quoted from: *Austro-Ugarska i Srbija 1903–1918, Dokumenti iz bečkih arhiva, IV* (1906), ed. A. Radenić, (Belgrade: Istorijski institut, 1989), Doc. no. 18 & 40. Viennese diplomacy was especially fearful because they suspected that any future rail projects would have the support of Germany, which would set German Balkan policy away from the Habsburg goals: “If the Serbian-Bulgarian railway alliance comes about, then Berlin will be a good deal closer to its goal. Our Monarchy would then be stuck between the German Reichsbahn network and the Serbian-Bulgarian Railway Association” (translated from German). *HHStA*, PA XIX Serbien Kopie. Ad 3153/9.

¹⁰ For the details and nature of Serbian export see: D. Djordjević, *Carinski rat Srbije i Austro-Ugarske 1906–1911* (Belgrade: Istorijski institut, 1962), 1–31.

go to Austria-Hungary went through its territories to other destinations. The Habsburgs wanted to crush the Serbian economy as a punishment for its independent foreign policy, and in the next 5 years, with some interruptions, the borders of Austria-Hungary remained closed for Serbian products. In historiography, this is known as the *Pig War*, *Schweinekrieg*, or *Customs War*.

At the time, Serbia and Switzerland were the only European countries without sea access. For some time, the Serbian Ministry of Infrastructure and Ministry of Foreign Affairs contemplated building a new railroad to connect the Adriatic Sea and the River Danube.¹¹ New railroads seemed a necessary foundation for the future. This new railroad promised diversification of trade and export possibilities. While this project had an extensive history, it remained more of a concept until 1906. The Kingdom of Serbia, isolated from all markets due to the Austro-Hungarian closure of borders, entered a state of alarm during this period.¹² Not only was the Austro-Hungarian border closed, but also the nature of Serbian export requested speed and allowed no delay: Serbia exported pork, beef, and fresh fruit. Despite the attempts to create a food processing industry, not a lot was achieved, and the speed of export remained a top priority.¹³ Trade agents and outposts financed by the Serbian government quickly discovered new potential buyers and markets in Egypt, Malta, Italy, France, and Great Britain.¹⁴

Given that Austria-Hungary forbade voyages upstream on the Danube for ships with Serbian goods, the existing alternative routes were a) the Black Sea, which could be reached by using Bulgarian railroads; b) Thessaloniki, a port city that could be reached by a direct railroad line coming from Belgrade. Exporting goods towards the Black Sea did not turn out to be a viable solution in the long term. Even though it was cheap, it was not fast. After reaching the Black Sea, there was still a long journey ahead to reach the Mediterranean markets. Jams and prunes could survive long journeys, just like wheat and timber, but the main export products, fresh fruit and livestock, could not. Thessaloniki seemed to be a good choice. However, a strong fear existed that the Ottoman government could close access to Thessaloniki for Serbian products.¹⁵ More-

¹¹ D. Djordjević, "Projekat Jadranske železnice u Srbiji (1896–1912)", *Istoriski glasnik III-IV* (1956), 1–33.

¹² The idea originated among Serbian merchants during the late 1890s. *Ibid.*, 3.

¹³ Djordjević, *Carinski rat*, 162, 302–303.

¹⁴ Bridge, *From Sadova*, 279; For a detailed account of establishing these trade agencies and outposts see: Djordjević, *Carinski rat*, 295–303.

¹⁵ In September 1906, a new trade deal between the Ottoman Empire and Serbia was signed. It was seen as favorable for Serbia. However, Serbian diplomats never believed that it could serve as a long-term solution. *Ibid.*, 187–188. These fears were justified in the coming period. In 1909, the Sublime Porte temporarily forbade further Serbian trade from Thessaloniki. See: D. Djordjević, "Austro – srpski sukob oko projekta novopazar-

over, new kinds of problems emerged in the Thessaloniki port. There were no appropriate stables where livestock could be held before transport ships arrived. Furthermore, disputes with merchant shipping companies emerged often. The small amount of goods coming from Serbia was not a good enough incentive for a reliable maritime merchant service.

It became obvious that Serbia desperately needed the new railroad. Between the “outbreak” of the Pig War in January 1906, and the end of 1908, the Serbian government actively worked on the so-called “Adriatic Railroad” to connect the Adriatic Sea and the Danube River. A new foreign loan, which was granted to the Serbian government, was intended partially for the construction of new railroads.¹⁶ The Serbian government hoped to connect one of the northern Albanian ports with Serbia. The railroad was to cross the Danube and connect with Romania and eventually with the Russian Empire.¹⁷ Because this imagined railroad in the Balkan Peninsula was positioned on the line northeast-southwest, unlike other railroads (and railroad projects) that were mainly positioned on the line northwest-southeast, in the contemporary diplomatic documents it was also called the “Transversal railroad”. Its imagined routes started from the Serbian-Romanian border on the Danube and went towards the South, South-West, to “Old Serbia” and Ottoman Macedonia, where it turned to the west, towards the north of Albania. The final goal was to reach one of the Albanian port cities. Because of its geographical position, the coastal town of San Giovanni di Medua (Shëngjin/Sveti Jovan Medovski) was considered the perfect location.

The first talks with the investors about the new potential transversal railroad took place in London in 1906. Contacts were made with James Sivewright, former Railroad Minister of the British Cape Colony. Sivewright started negotiations with the Serbian government. Soon after, with the backing of several British banks, several investors interested in food production, and construction firm Powling and Co, *The Balkan Railways Construction Syndicate* was formed. The plan was to send engineers to chart the terrain, propose the most viable route, and calculate the costs. A syndicate was formed to bring companies inter-

ske železnice”, *Istorijski časopis* VII (1957), 242. For a detailed account of the problems Serbian merchants encountered in Thessaloniki see: *Dokumenti o spoljnoj politici Kraljevine Srbije-Documents sur la politique extérieure do royaume de Serbie 1903–1914* (DSP), (Belgrade: SANU, 2006), Vol. II, No. 3/1, doc. No. 44.

¹⁶ Stevenson, “War by Timetable”, 182; “Extract from Annual Report for Serbia for the Year 1906”. In *British Documents on the Origins of the War 1898–1914*, eds. G. P. Gooch, H. Temperley, vol. V, (London: His Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1928), 321.

¹⁷ In January 1906, talks about the construction of a bridge that would connect Serbia and Romania were already underway. See: DSP, Vol. II, No. 1/1, doc. No. 58. Negotiations have begun in late 1890s.

ested in mining, the lumber industry, and the food trade, into the project.¹⁸ After some time, it became obvious that the biggest issue was neither the mountainous terrain nor the unfavorable financial conditions set by the newly established Syndicate. The main obstacle was also not the fact that all Albanian harbors were shallow and required at least some deepening. In the Balkans, in the years before the outbreak of the Great War, for this kind of railroad project, a project that included building in the territories of the Ottoman Empire, the prerequisite was not funding or the support of capable engineers. It was a consensus among the Great Powers. The Balkan Railways Construction Syndicate did not have any political backing. Therefore, it could not achieve much.

Divergent Views: Unpacking Responses to Serbia's Adriatic Railway Initiative

The only way to understand the history of plans to build the Adriatic Railroad is to understand it in the context of Great Power rivalries. The period between 1906 and 1908 was marked by growing hostility among European Powers. In 1905, Russia was defeated in a war against Japan, which opened a vacuum of power that several powers attempted to fill. In January 1906, representatives of the Great Powers met at Algeiras for a conference supposed to solve the Morocco Crisis from the previous year. What happened in the following three years was that tensions remained high among the Great Powers. In 1907, the Anglo-Russian Convention was signed. The two great rivals were now acting evermore following each other. Opposing blocs, which would get their final shape in the summer of 1914, were slowly emerging, and these tense relations, which existed on a global scale, were reflected in the Balkans and the proposed Adriatic Railroad. What is important to note is that the plans to build the Adriatic railroad were formulated between two crises. The idea was put forward after the Pig War started when, from a Serbian perspective, the need for new communication corridors became obvious. Everything came to an end during the Bosnian Crisis of 1908–1909, after which the whole region was considered to be completely unstable and thus unsuitable for any kind of expensive construction project.

Even before the attempts with James Sivewright proved futile, the Serbian government launched a different kind of initiative. It seems that this plan was based on suggestions that came from Miroslav Spaljković, Serbian envoy in St. Petersburg. Spaljković was not just an ordinary Serbian diplomat. He was a close friend and confidant of Nikola Pašić, Serbian Prime Minister from April 1906 to July 1908. On May 3rd 1906, Spaljković sent a confidential memo

¹⁸ For negotiation details with British investors and construction companies see: *DSP*, Vol. 2, No. 2/1, doc. No. 1; *DSP*, Vol. 2, No. 2/2, doc. No. 247; *DSP*, Vol. 2, No. 2/2, doc. No. 354; *DSP*, Vol. 2, No. 2/2, doc. No. 357; *DSP*, Vol. 2, No. 2/2, doc. No. 420; *DSP*, Vol. 2, No. 2/2, doc. No. 421; *DSP*, Vol. 2, No. 3/1, doc. No. 26.

to Belgrade. In this lengthy document, he outlined the methods that ought to be used during diplomatic negotiations whose ultimate goal was the construction of the planned Adriatic railroad.¹⁹ His recommendations and conclusions can be summarized in the following way: a) Multinational projects have better chances for success since they would provoke less suspicion and opposition b) Great Britain should be attracted to support the project, but equally important is the support of France and Italy c) growing hostility among powers could prove *beneficial* for Serbia's plans since maintenance of the *status quo* towards the Ottoman Empire would almost certainly mean that there would be no railroads construction in the European parts of the Ottoman Empire.

Spaljković's hopes rested on the growing hostility between Great Britain and Germany, and he presumed that this would be an incentive for British diplomacy to support the Serbian project. He maintained that Serbian interests lay on the same side as the interests of Great Britain, France, Italy, and Russia and that the new railroad would serve as a kind of blockade for the future political and economic penetration of the Central European empires into Asia Minor. Spaljković understood how great infrastructural projects depended on Great Power politics. I will present the interactions of Serbian diplomacy with all parties involved, interactions with their politics and actions, one by one. This seems to be a better way to understand negotiations about the Adriatic Railroad project than simply to follow the chronology of the events, which may lead us to omit existing trends and continuities.

For Serbia, the Adriatic Railroad had a dual character. Firstly, it was an opportunity to make any future customs wars with the Habsburg Monarchy obsolete and to enhance Serbian trade and economy. Secondly, it was about the political influence that came with new railroads. On the one hand, the railroad could have increased Serbia's influence in the Ottoman Macedonia part of the Ottoman Empire, to which all the Balkan states laid claim.²⁰ On the other hand, the connection with Russian railroads was supposed to be a counterbalance to the Habsburg influence. This counterbalance was meant to create maneuvering space so that Serbia could never become totally dependent on one of its powerful neighbors. Enabling trade with both Russia and Austria-Hungary would provide much-needed room for maneuvering in Serbia's foreign policy. With this

¹⁹ For the full text see: *DSP*, Vol. 2, No. 1/2, doc. No. 434; See also: Z. D. Bajin, *Miroslav Spaljković: 1869–1951 – biografija* (PhD manuscript) (Belgrade: University of Belgrade, 2016), 96.

²⁰ This represented continuity with the construction of the first railroads that connected the Kingdom of Serbia and the Ottoman Empire. Since the 1880s and the construction of the first railroad in Macedonia, new railroads in Serbia were understood as an opportunity for further strengthening the national interest in the Ottoman Empire. See: S. Terzić, "Stojan Novaković i Železnička konvencija sa Turskom 1887", *Istorijski časopis XXXIII* (1976), 119.

in mind, Serbian diplomats started a wide diplomatic offensive in Rome, Paris, London, St. Petersburg, and, naturally, in Constantinople. In the Ottoman capital, every move was taken with extreme care, since it was assumed that it would be hard to convince the Sublime Port to allow construction on its own soil.

The Habsburg Empire from the outset was the biggest opponent of the proposed Adriatic Railroad. This is usually understood as one of the measures created to block Russian influence in the Balkans. As Francis Roy Bridge noted, since the Habsburgs lost control over territories in Italy and German lands in the 1850s and 1860s, they were particularly fearful of the possibility that Russian influence in the Balkans:

“Might expose them [Austria-Hungary] yet again to that disastrous combination of irredentist nationalism backed by a first-class power, this time with terminally fatal consequences for the Great Power status of the Monarchy – encircled by Russia, excluded from its colonial markets in the Balkans, and at the mercy of irredentist neighbors.”²¹

However, as will be shown, Serbia had a very hard time getting Russia to support its plans. The general fear of the Russian growing influence pushed Vienna to be assertive even when Russia hoped to keep the *status quo*. Another way to understand the perspective of Viennese diplomacy is to point to the intricate connection between foreign and internal politics of the Habsburg Empire. The Kingdom of Serbia could not be allowed to become politically and economically independent from the Habsburg influence, not just simply because of Serbia itself, a state that could never present any serious threat to the Habsburg Monarchy, but because of the possible rise of the prestige of independent Serbia among numerous Serbs and other South Slavs in Austria-Hungary.²² This is how this railway project, initiated by the Kingdom of Serbia, with its population of fewer than three million citizens, evolved into a significant security concern for Austria-Hungary.

During these three years, between 1906 and 1908, Austria-Hungary pressured the Sublime Porte to not even start negotiating about the railroad. The Habsburg diplomacy sought German support and looked for other ways to foil this project. Firstly, Vienna bribed the local Albanian population in West-

²¹ F. R. Bridge, “The Sanjak of Novibazar Railway project”. In *Railways and International Politics: Paths of Empire 1848–1945*, eds. T. G. Otte, K. Nielson, (London: Routledge, 2006), 68.

²² A. Mitrović, *Prodor na Balkan: Srbija u planovima Austro-Ugarske i Nemačke 1908–1918* (Belgrade: Zavod za udžbenike, 2011), 120–128; This line of reasoning, whose credo was that any kind of independent South Slav polity, despite scarce economic or military potential, was exceptionally dangerous for Austria-Hungary security, had a history in the Habsburg official thinking. See: Bridge, *From Sadowa*, 8–9, 23, 72, 79, 93, 141, 289, and especially 150.

ern Macedonia. The local Albanians were instructed to scare off the engineers who measured the terrain and sketched possible routes.²³ Secondly, Vienna supported other railroad projects, the ones that would diminish the value of the proposed Adriatic railroad. First, the Vienna government supported the Bulgarian wish to connect Kyustendil in Western Bulgaria with Kumanovo in Macedonia.²⁴

Moreover, the foreign minister Aehrenthal renewed an old Austrian project to connect Bosnia and Herzegovina, still formally part of the Ottoman Empire but under Austrian occupation, with Thessaloniki and Athens.²⁵ He declared publicly in the parliament that this route was “the shortest route from Central Europe to Egypt and India”.²⁶ As a shrewd and experienced diplomat, Aehrenthal knew how the other powers would react. Similarly, he was well aware that the Ottoman Sultan would consider all these projects a grave danger to the Ottoman state and that the Sublime Porte would have no choice but to allow no construction at all. Aehrenthal wanted to make an atmosphere where it would be easy for the sultan to reject all projects.

British diplomats believed that Aehrenthal offered one more thing to the Sultan in exchange for not allowing the Adriatic Railroad. For more than a decade, the Great Powers had negotiated reforms in Macedonia, part of the Ottoman Empire, a region marked by unstable security and inhabited by numerous nationalities and ethnic groups. The fear was that a spark from Macedonia could ignite a new Great Eastern Crisis, like the one from the 1870s, which could bring the Great Powers to the brink of a new conflict. Therefore, European diplomats worked hard on the reform project in Macedonia. The greatest problem was the lack of security. As the Ottoman state capacity was in decline, tax collection was not conducted by state officials. Instead, the right to collect tax was sold to local strongmen. Often, tax collection represented an attempt to take as much as possible from the local population and was often accompanied by violence. It was recognized that a security reform could prevent future crises. The core of the plan was to bring non-Muslims into the local police force. This plan had existed since the 1903 Austro-Russian Mürzsteg Agreement, but it was never implemented.²⁷

²³ DSP, Vol. 3, No. 1/1, doc. No. 20; DSP, Vol. 3, No. 1/1, doc. No. 150.

²⁴ DSP, Vol. 2, No. 3/2, doc. No. 556.

²⁵ DSP, Vol. 3, No. 1/1, doc. No. 37.

²⁶ Doc. No. 869I. In *Die Große Politik der europäischen Kabinette 1871–1914, Band 25/2: Die englisch-russische Entente und der Osten*, (Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte).

²⁷ M. Biondich, “The Balkan Wars: the Patterns of Violence in the Balkans Leading up to the First World War”. In *The Routledge History Handbook of Central and Eastern*

British diplomats believed that Austria was deliberately sabotaging the reforms in Macedonia. The Sultan was an opponent of reform projects from the outset. By helping the Sultan, Vienna hoped to get some favors from Ottoman diplomacy. Edward Grey, British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, wrote:

“I have said that these developments in Macedonian reform negotiations coinciding with irade by the Sultan in favor of Austrian railway projects make it appear that while we are credited at Constantinople with responsibility for initiating Macedonian Reform proposals, other Powers get concessions from the Sultan by obstructing them. It was impossible to work the Concert on these lines and I regarded the dropping of Judicial Reform proposals under these conditions as a step towards breaking up the concert.”²⁸

Grey was completely right, as documents in Austrian archives show. Solomon Wank was the first historian who pointed to the logic behind the moves taken by the Habsburg diplomacy. Based on diplomatic dispatches of the Habsburg diplomats, he demonstrated that the Habsburg diplomacy traded their obstruction of Macedonian reforms for the Sultan’s approval of their own railroad projects, which were supposed to connect Austria-Hungary with Thessaloniki, though the Sanjak of Novibazar.²⁹ The Serbian project was confronted from the beginning by the suspicious sultan and hostile Austria-Hungary. But the Adriatic railroad project did not die immediately, because other Great Powers were ready to support it. In his memo, Spalajković sensed that the antagonism between the powers could mean that the Serbian project would have support.

Italian diplomats understood well the intensity of the Austro-Serb conflict. The Italian consul in Belgrade wrote in March 1906 to Foreign Minister Guicciardini about something that is often forgotten by contemporary historians. The Italian consul in Belgrade informed his superiors that the Serbo-Bulgarian trade deal, the cause of the entire crisis, was never put to a vote in the Serbian national assembly. However, the Austro-Hungarian border remained closed.³⁰ The issue between Belgrade and Vienna was never simply about the economy. It was about power and prestige. Moreover, Italian diplomats reported the Austro-

Europe in the Twentieth Century, Volume 4: Violence, eds. J. Böhler, W. Borodziej, J. von Puttkamer, (London: Routledge, 2016), 9.

²⁸ *British Documents*, Vol. V, doc. No. 231.

²⁹ S. Wank, “Aehrenthal and the Sanjak of Novibazar Railway Project: A Reappraisal”, *The Slavonic and East European Review* XLII (1964), 353–369, esp. footnote 44.

³⁰ “But what about the famous Serbian-Bulgarian rail convention, the primary cause of the whole affair, someone will ask? And well, this has also been foreseen. The deadline for its approval was the 1st of this month, which passed without it being presented to the Skupchtina. Now we don’t talk about it anymore” (translation from Italian). *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, Terza Serie 1896–1907, Vol. IX, No. 603.

Hungarian opposition to Italian rail projects in the eastern Adriatic.³¹ Lastly, the potential for Italian commercial penetration into Albania, Serbia, and even Romania, was evident to the Italian ambassador to Constantinople.³² It is not surprising that Italy supported from the beginning the idea of building a railroad from the Adriatic Sea to the Danube River. Italian diplomats believed this project presented a possible means to block something they feared severely: the complete penetration of Habsburg and German influence in the Balkans.³³ Italy had its ambitions and plans in the region, and competition from the Habsburgs was not desirable. Support for the Serbian project in Italy was manifold. Italian diplomats advised their Serbian counterparts about the best possible course of action.³⁴ This represented valuable input since Italian networks and information gathering surpassed the reach of Serbian diplomacy. Italian investors immediately demonstrated interest in financing the construction.³⁵ Italy did not just support Serbian plans; moreover, Rome became the place where ambassadors of other countries were approached to solicit the support of their respective countries for the Adriatic railroad.³⁶

Italian diplomats helped their Serbian counterparts to better understand the Great Power relations of the time, arguing that fear of the German influence in the Ottoman Empire was the main reason that could make Great Britain to decide to support the railroad. The interest of Italian investors was formalized in Milan, where the financial consortium *Danube–Adriatic* was created. Similarly to Spaljković, the Italians believed that a multinational financial project had better chances than a project that had just one power behind it. Moreover, they advised the Serbian government to act according to this premise. At the same time, the Italians contacted both the Ottoman bank in Constantinople and French investors in France regarding the proposed railroad project.³⁷ A railroad that would end in northern Albania, a region where Italy already tended to project its influence, was completely compatible with Italian foreign policy. The possibility of access to the Balkan hinterland, the lower Danube, and Russian

³¹ *Ibid.*, No. 279n.

³² *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, Terza Serie 1896–1907, Vol. X, No. 192

³³ C. J. Lowe & F. Marzari, *Italian Foreign Policy 1870–1940* (London: Routledge, 1975), 104; Lj. Aleksić-Pejković, “Italija i Jadranska železnica”, *Istorijski časopis XXXIV* (1987), 256, 263.

³⁴ *DSP*, Vol. 2, No. 2/2, doc. No. 335.

³⁵ *DSP*, Vol. 2, No. 1/2, doc. No. 626.

³⁶ *DSP*, Vol. 2, No. 3/1, doc. No. 34; *DSP*, Vol. 2, No. 3/1, doc. No. 272; *DSP*, Vol. 3, No. 1/1, doc. No. 265.

³⁷ A. Tamborra, “The Rise of Italian Industry and the Balkans (1900–1914)”, *The Journal of European Economic History* III (1974), 115; Aleksić-Pejković, “Italija i Jadranska”, 264–265.

railways was very tempting for Italian interests. Italian diplomats even contemplated, in the case of the full cooperation between Russia, France, and Italy being established, sending a fleet to Ottoman waters to force the Sultan to allow the construction.³⁸

A comparative reading of Serbian and Italian documents reveals that the Italians did not share their views fully with their Serb interlocutors. Italians did not share fully the strong impression that the chance of success was not high.³⁹ Despite the small chances of success, Italian diplomats still argued for the project.⁴⁰ Unlike Serbia, Italy understood that it could always back away from the project in order to get benefits elsewhere. Moreover, Italian support was limited in two other ways. Firstly, Italian diplomacy was aware that from the financial point of view, they could not act alone. In other words, French financial participation was necessary.⁴¹ Secondly, because of its complex relations with Germany, especially in the aftermath of the Algeciras conference, Italy tended to co-opt France into a leading position of this temporary coalition which stood behind the proposed Adriatic railroad. Italian diplomats stressed that they were not willing to be the first to openly challenge Austro-Hungarian policies in the Balkans.⁴²

Just like Italy, France showed immediate interest in the project of the Serbian government. In this case, we can see the most striking example of the coordination of foreign policy and investment policy. The French government, together with French bankers, representatives of the *Societe Financiere d'Orient*, and the *Ottoman bank*, discussed with Serbian diplomats the potential solutions for the realization of this project.⁴³ Not just in France, but also in Constantinople, Serbian envoys had multiple conversations with French diplomats and bankers, and all of them together tried to figure out who in the Sublime Porte was the most likely to support this project.⁴⁴ It was important that this figure had sufficient influence on the Sultan and Ottoman politics.

French interest in this project had a strong financial aspect, and the French investors were aware that neither Russian nor Italian financial circles

³⁸ DSP, Vol. 3, No. 1/1, doc. No. 265.

³⁹ "Evidently sooner or later the construction of the railway will come about, but Austria will certainly make every effort in Constantinople to prevent it, and, if Germany joins it, which at the present moment seems very probable, the obstacles will be greater than the Serbs have been led to think" (translation from Italian). *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, Vol. X, No. 192.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, No. 209.

⁴¹ Aleksić-Pejković, "Italija i Jadranska", 265.

⁴² DSP, Vol. 3, No. 1/1, doc. No. 90.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, doc. No. 156, 190; Djordjević, "Projekt Jadranske", 12.

⁴⁴ DSP, Vol. 3, No. 2/1, doc. No. 324.

had enough money to realize this project on their own. However, the political aspect was equally strong from the French perspective. It seems that French diplomacy did not want Russian prestige to suffer another blow, after the revolution of 1905 and the defeat in the Far East in the war against Japan. The French feared that if that happened, the Russian debt to France and future loans could come into question. Also, France needed a strong Russia to counter Germany. Another reason that stood behind French support was their thinking that if Thessaloniki became a port city dominated by Austria-Hungary, French influence in the Balkans would come into question.⁴⁵ From the beginning of 1908, this project almost became solely a French venture, from the financial point of view. Furthermore, in February 1908, the Serbian government decided to consult with their French counterparts before taking any decision in regard to the railroad project.⁴⁶ Paris was the place where it was decided, after consultations between the Ottoman Bank and Jonction Salonique-Constantinople that Régie générale des chemins de fer would study the possible routes.⁴⁷ Moreover, the final description of the route was created in Paris.⁴⁸

Even though Habsburg diplomacy feared that the Adriatic railroad, if ever completed, would bolster Russian prestige and influence, it was not easy for Serbian diplomats to solicit Russian support. As soon as the project started at the beginning of 1906, the Russian government was informed. However, it was immediately obvious that the Russian side had no intention of supporting the project.⁴⁹ In the following months, Serbian attempts to acquire the support of official St. Petersburg were continuous.⁵⁰ However, the Russian stance was equally persistent. Politically and economically weakened, the Russian Empire did not believe it was the proper time for any kind of diplomatic offensive in the Balkans. Russian foreign minister Izvolski claimed: "Russia must be assured of peace from Kamatchka to Gibraltar for ten years."⁵¹ Izvolski hoped to continue

⁴⁵ Djordjević, "Austro-srpski", 229. For a general overview of French politics towards the Kingdom of Serbia see: V. Pavlović, *De la Serbie vers la Yougoslavie: la France et la naissance de la Yougoslavie 1878-1918* (Belgrade: Institute for Balkan Studies, 2015).

⁴⁶ DSP, Vol. 3, No. 1/1, doc. No. 224.

⁴⁷ DSP, Vol. 3, No. 2/1, doc. No. 191. A couple of months before this happened, it was decided that Jonction Salonique-Constantinople, and not the Serbian government, would formally request from the Sublime Porte the permit to construct the railroad. DSP, Vol. 3, No. 1/1, doc. No. 212.

⁴⁸ DSP, Vol. 3, No. 2/1, doc. No. 337.

⁴⁹ DSP, Vol. 2, No. 1/1, doc. No. 124.

⁵⁰ DSP, Vol. 2, No. 3/1, doc. No. 366, 428, 677.

⁵¹ D. M. McDonald, *United Government and Foreign Policy in Russia, 1900–1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 109.

cooperation with Austria-Hungary and therefore knew that Russia could not stand behind the Serbian railroad project.

The first time Serbian diplomacy started to get some positive signs from St. Petersburg was in 1908, only after Austria-Hungary set out on her railroad-building path in the Balkans, which *de facto* meant a violation of the Russo-Austrian Mürzsteg Agreement from 1903.⁵² Even then Russia promised only its support but not initiative.⁵³ Russian diplomats lent their support to the Adriatic railroad in Constantinople only after Italians had already done that before them, and after Russian Foreign Minister Izvolski understood that there was no more *status quo* in the Balkans. It seems that Izvolski's motivation was the following: he hoped that he would attract Italy to the Balkans so that Italy, instead of Russia, could block the Habsburg penetration towards Thessaloniki.⁵⁴ The first proactive Russian moves came only in the days of the Young Turk Revolution when all of the Powers were repositioning themselves to reflect the new political situation.⁵⁵ In the coming months, Serbian diplomats still had the feeling that Russia would gladly ditch the Adriatic railroad project if only Austria-Hungary would abandon her own project of connecting Bosnia and Herzegovina with Thessaloniki.⁵⁶

Unlike Italy or France, Great Britain never actively worked in favor of the new rail projects, not just the Adriatic railroad but also the Austro-Hungarian one. Edward Grey feared German influence in the Ottoman Empire but was reluctant to support the Adriatic Railroad, believing that by doing this, he would push the Ottoman Empire even stronger into Germany's arms.⁵⁷ Only after the Sublime Porte allowed the building of the Austro-Hungarian project, the British ambassador in Constantinople supported the Adriatic railroad.⁵⁸ That happened in the summer of 1908, when the whole project looked more and more unattainable.

⁵² DSP, Vol. 3, No. 1/1, doc. No. 59, 114. See also: V. V. Zaitsev, "The Shaping of Russian Foreign Policy on Turkey and the Balkans 1908-1911", *Oxford Slavonic Papers XXXII* (1999), 53-54; S. Wank, *In the Twilight of Empire: Count Alois Lexa von Aehrenthal 1854-1912: Imperial Habsburg Patriot and Statesman*, vol. I (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2009), 200-201, 347-349.

⁵³ DSP, Vol. 3, No. 1/1, doc. No. 128, 176.

⁵⁴ Aleksić-Pejković, "Italija i Jadranska", 261.

⁵⁵ DSP, Vol. 3, No. 2/1, doc. No. 174.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, Doc. No. 425, 456.

⁵⁷ Grey wrote: "We had been approached by the Servians some time ago, and had told them we were favourable to railway projects generally, but could not promise our support to any particular project". *British Documents*, Vol. 5, doc. No. 238.

⁵⁸ DSP, Vol. 3, No. 2/1, doc. No. 351.

In the period between 1906 and 1908, Germany followed a line of reasoning similar to Britain's. It seems that Germany and Great Britain were in mutual equilibrium and were mostly concerned with the possibility that the other would gain predominant influence in the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, they did not want to pressure the Sublime Porte over any issue. German Foreign Minister Heinrich Leonhard von Tschirschky wrote in May of 1907: "We have assured the Austrian minister of our willingness to support his railway project if it could be implemented with the approval of the Sultan. Against his will, we could not proceed in light of our specific interests in Constantinople".⁵⁹

In the following months, the German position indeed changed, but only slightly. Tschirschky's successor as Foreign Minister of the German Empire, Wilhelm Eduard Freiherr von Schoen, wrote a short note to the German ambassador in Constantinople on 31st December 1907: "Carefully support for the Austro-Hungarian approach to the railway issue".⁶⁰

Conclusion

During the whole period covered by this article, the Foreign Ministry of the Kingdom of Serbia collected as much information and instruction as it could get about various schemes and plans made by the Great Powers. The Serbian government, which lacked adequate finances to push for this kind of project on its own, tried to solve the conundrum of getting a concession to build in the Ottoman Empire and acquiring enough investment for the construction. In June 1908, the final details about the new consortium that was supposed to build a new railroad were agreed upon. French bankers invested 45% of the capital, Italian 35%, and the rest was covered by Serbia and Russia, on equal terms. Another company was set up in order to build a harbor in Albania; the Italians came with 55% and the French with 45% of the required capital.

The Young Turk Revolution of July 1908 caught everyone by surprise. Immediately, almost everything was put on hold. All diplomats in Constantinople wanted to wait and see what would come out of the unexpected new political reality. In October 1908, simultaneously, Bulgaria declared independence and Austria-Hungary declared annexation of the Ottoman territories of Bosnia and Herzegovina. An international crisis was on the horizon. Soon, it became clear that under the new circumstances, the Ottoman government was not going to allow any new building projects. The danger of war ended all construction plans.

This case study opens a window of opportunity to access the infrastructural project-making in the Balkans prior to the First World War. The Kingdom

⁵⁹ *Große Politik*, Vol. 22, doc. No. 7373.

⁶⁰ *Große Politik*, Vol. 25/2, doc. No. 8689.

of Serbia, a small, underdeveloped country without sufficient capital, found itself at a turbulent crossroads of Great Power rivalry as soon as it proposed the Adriatic railroad. Between 1906 and 1908, there was no doubt that the construction of the Adriatic Railroad would bring economic benefits. The overarching question that hung over the entire project was: who would benefit the most? This was the primary driver of the opposition to the project. Moreover, support for the railroad was not solely based on economic reasoning. For Serbia and other actors, it served a dual purpose. For Serbia, the railroad would, above all, allow more freedom in foreign policy. For other supporters, the project not only made economic sense but also promised to limit the Habsburg presence in the Balkans.

It's impossible to overlook the fact that, despite variations in support, the project ultimately garnered both endorsement and opposition in a manner strongly reminiscent of the alliance structure that would solidify in 1914 and 1915. Britain was not eager to support the plan, but, as we have seen, its Foreign Office did express dissatisfaction with the Habsburg actions. Furthermore, this case study illustrates that, despite financial constraints and challenging terrain, the insurmountable challenge lay in the political realm. Multinational cooperation was deemed the optimal approach for undertaking transcontinental projects, as it was believed to possess the capacity to address all potential challenges. However, in the end, even this proved unsuccessful. This should be taken into consideration when thinking about the broader history of the Balkan infrastructural underdevelopment. The railroad that had financial backing and a planned route in 1908 was finished only in the 1970s. Equally, it seems that Spalajković was right. The interest of the Great Powers to support an infrastructural project was higher in the times when the *status quo* was challenged. The need to limit the Habsburg penetration into the Balkans was part of the motivation behind support for the Adriatic railroad. In other words, the greatest chance for the Balkan infrastructure was in periods of tense relations between the Great Powers. The ill fate of the Adriatic Railroad points to the Balkan predicament: the railway project became possible due to the conflicting interests between the Powers. It failed because deteriorating relations among them developed into a full-blown crisis.

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