

Gladstone's Role during the Great Eastern Crisis

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In early July of 1975 the uprising in Herzegovina spread quickly throughout the neighboring region of Bosnia. The difficult fate of the South Slavs under Ottoman occupation became known to the whole of Europe. Gradually a wide spread revolt engulfed also Bulgaria and Romania. In order to help the suffering population, an International Relief Committee was formed in Paris. The Relief Committee was headed by the Serbian Metropolitan Mihail Jovanović and aided by the Croatian Bishop Josip Strossmayer. The Committee was ably supported by the Slavic Benevolent Society in Russia, with its outstanding members, including the writer Ivan Aksakov and countess Antonina Bliudova.

During the height of the Eastern Crisis, Lord William Ewart Gladstone, the distinguished English statesman, stood out as the most influential spokesmen on behalf of the South Slavs. His famous speeches in Parliament, and notably his book, *Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East*, instigated a sincere concern and willingness to help among the public at large.

Gladstone's support was very significant in view of the official English position under the aegis of the Premier Benjamin Disraeli. Disraeli aspired to preserve the precarious European equilibrium inclusive of the Turkish presence in the Balkans. He believed that the disappearance of Turkey from the Balkans would produce difficulties for England as well as for worldwide political relations. In reality, Disraeli and the English government acted against the concerns of eminent personalities and of English society at large. As may be expected, Disraeli's position drew criticism not only from his English peers but from a number of Serbian and Russian personalities.¹

¹ Vasa Pelagić, *Istorija Bosnasko-Hercegovacke bune*, pp.72-74. Fedor Dostoevsky, *The Diary of a Writer*, pp.427-433.

The well known poet Oscar Wilde wrote the following note addressed to Gladstone in May of 1877:

“Your noble and impassioned protests, both written and spoken, against the massacres of the Christians in Bulgaria have so roused my heart that I venture to send you a sonnet which I have written on the subject ... “²

Wilde was not the only poet to express his disdain. In March of 1877 Alfred Tennyson wrote his celebrated sonnet *Montenegro* focusing attention on the Balkan wars for liberation. Tennyson’s association with Lord Gladstone heightened his concern for the distant Montenegrins. The sonnet illustrated Tennyson’s interpretation of the implications caused by the historic conflicts of Turkey and Montenegro.

Tennyson was elevated to the much esteemed position of the court poet, “poeta laureatus.” His poetic eloquence resounded as well in a number of contemporary political poems relating to issues that he had witnessed. His sonnet *Montenegro* was published in May of 1877 in the Journal, *The Nineteenth Century*. Tennyson considered this sonnet as one of his finest, placing it first among his other poems.³

The editors of the *Nineteenth Century* asked Gladstone to write a commentary for the Tennyson’s sonnet. Gladstone gladly obliged, stating that he considered this offer an honor. He produced an engaging historical treatise about Montenegro entitled: “Montenegro: A Sketch.” Gladstone’s treatise was published in the same issue of *The Nineteenth Century*.⁴

Although Gladstone chooses to describe his piece as “A Sketch,” pointing to the professed incompleteness of his piece, he managed to expostulate the most salient moments of Montenegro’s history. Most of all, Gladstone praised Montenegrins as “extraordinary people who were not sufficiently known and understood by the rest of the world.”

² Quoted after R.T. Shanon, *Gladstone and the Bulgarian Agitation 1876*, p. 187.

³ Hallam Lord Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson, A Memory by his Son*, London, Macmillan 1899, pp.1236-1240

⁴ *The Nineteenth Century*, Vol. I, No. III, May 1877, p. 359 and pp. 360-379.

Gladstone believed that an interpreter between Montenegro and the public at large had been found in the person of his friend, the Scottish poet Tennyson. He feared that even a plain presentation of the history of Montenegro might seem an exaggeration or a fable.⁵

Gladstone reminded his readers that the Ottoman conquest in the fourteenth century made rapid advances and destroyed fortunes of the Southern Slavs. At this point in history, the Slavs were among the most civilized peoples in Europe. In the aftermath of the Turkish invasion in 1484 the Montenegrins decided to leave their ancestral tracts and establish a new capital in the high hills amidst the precipices of Cetinje. The printing press was carried in the hills during this arduous journey. Gladstone found both the possession and careful handling of the press as remarkable. He pointed out that Oxford, Cambridge or Edinburgh did not have a press at that time. The rich London metropolis produced the earliest printed volume in England by Caxton just seven years earlier.

During the Serbian-Turkish war from July to October 1876, the Turks suffered defeats in conflicts with the men of Montenegro. Gladstone mentioned several accounts of such victories. On the 6th of September a five soldier battalions of Montenegro defeated Dervish Pasha and his men. On the other hand, the Serbian army, with a few professional soldiers, suffered great losses and was eventually defeated by the Turks.⁶

Gladstone stressed that the people of Montenegro had maintained their resolve to stay free through an unbroken series of trials “to which is hard to find a parallel in the annals of Europe, perhaps even of mankind.”⁷

In conclusion Gladstone acknowledged several studies dealing with the history and customs of Montenegro. He singled out the co-authored book by G. Frilley and Jovan Wlahoviti, *Le Montenegro Contemporaine* published in Paris in 1770. He also praised Spiridon Gopchevitch for his *Montenegro und die Montenegriner*, printed in Leipzig in 1877.

⁵ Gladstone, *Montenegro*, p.360.

⁶ Gladstone, *Montenegro*, p. 373.

⁷ Gladstone, *Montenegro*, p. 362

Gladstone had words of great praise for the book by G. Muir Mackenzie and A.P. Irby declaring it a result of much time and care being “the most valuable contribution extant in our language. These two ladies were able to bestow to our knowledge of those South Slavonic provinces whose future will as we may humbly trust, redeem the miseries of their past.”⁸

Gladstone was referring to the book *The Slavonic Provinces of Turkey in Europe* written by G. Muir Mackenzie and A.P Irby. Both authors followed the Debate on Turkey in the Parliament and explicitly mentioned in the Preface to their book the Debate on May 29, 1863.

It was during this Debate that Gladstone delivered a speech about the history of the Turkish conquest in the Balkans and the adverse consequences on the progress of civilization of these countries. The Introduction to their travelogue testified that the authors were well read about the Balkan history and current evaluation of the Eastern Question. The authors planned well for their journey and were duly informed about the situation in the Balkans prior to their trip.⁹

Gladstone finished his essay with a well chosen quotation from Issaiah IX, 15:

*Whereas thou hast been forsaken and hated, so that no man went through thee; I will make thee an eternal Excellency, a joy of many generations.*¹⁰

Gladstone’s lofty hopes about the resolution of misfortunes of Montenegro, as well as of most of the states in the Balkans, have unfortunately not been fulfilled. However, the Serbian people and their leaders appreciated Gladstone’s efforts on their behalf. In 1880, Gladstone received a special *Memorandum* signed on behalf of the Serbian people by outstanding personalities as a token of gratitude for his support of the Serbian and South Slav cause. The *Memorandum* was hand carried to London and personally delivered to Gladstone in 1880 by the noted politician Nikola S. Jovanović. Jovanović wrote afterwards a detailed account of his conversation with Gladstone on this occasion.¹¹

⁸ Gladstone, *Montenegro*, p. 379

⁹ G. Muir Mackenzie and A.P. Irby, *The Slavonic Provinces of Turkey in Europe*, London and New York, Strahan, 1886. Reprint Edition by Arno Press 1971, p. XXIX.

¹⁰ Gladstone, *Montenegro*, p. 379

¹¹ Nikola S. Jovanović, *Gladstonov prijem srpske adrese*, Zadar, Offprint from *Srpski List*, 1881.

In England, a number of personalities of the public life shared Gladstone's views. Edward Augustus Freeman, a renowned historian was an outspoken opponent of the Turkophile policies since the Crimean War.¹² By October of 1876, in the midst of the uprising in Bosnia-Herzegovina Freeman has collected through individual appeals and letters to the press nearly 5,000 pounds. This well organized support for the insurgents in Bosnia and Herzegovina enabled eventually a well planned effort to protect the suffering Bulgarian population in the course of the uprising.

Moreover, the English clergy headed by the Metropolitan and Archbishop A.C. Cantuar, and the Canon of St. Paul's Cathedral H.P. Liddon voiced from their pulpits their support for the Christian South Slavs.¹³

On August 30 1876, the Editors of *The Guardian* published the correspondence between the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Primate of all England A.C. Cantuar, and the Serbian Archbishop of Belgrade and Metropolitan Mihailo Jovanović. Metropolitan Mihailo had written to Archbishop Cantuar a letter dated July 4, 1876. He also enclosed a letter by the leading personalities of Bosnia-Herzegovina addressing English people seeking Christian sympathy and support. Metropolitan Mihailo wrote:

“To His Grace the most Revered Father in God, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Lambeth Place, Surrey.

My Lord,

Certain leading inhabitants of Bosnia and Herzegovina have addressed a letter to the people of England making an appeal to their Christian feelings, and recounting the dreadful secular oppression from which they suffer under the Ottoman yoke.

A French translation of this address has been forwarded to the Editors of the Times and other English newspapers for publication: but we take the liberty to place the original document with the signatures in your Grace's hands, praying that you may retain the same as a voucher of the geniuses and *bona fide* character.

I am, my Lord Archbishop your faithful brother in Christ,

¹² Quoted after R.T. Shanon, *Gladstone and the Bulgarian Agitation 1876*, p.37.

¹³ R.T. Shanon, *Gladstone and the Bulgarian Agitation 1876*, Connecticut, Archon, 1975, p. 187.

Michael, Archbishop of Belgrade and Metropolitan of Servia.¹⁴

The enclosed document was signed by an imposing number of leading personalities headed by the Archimandrite of Herzegovina Nikiphor Douthitch (Ducić). The document described the difficult conditions imposed on the Christian population by the Ottoman occupation.¹⁵

Metropolitan Cantuar replied on August 3, 1876, and assured the Serbian Archbishop of the sympathy of the English people. He also assured him that the government of Disraeli would try to do its best to diminish the sufferings of the Christian peoples. Cantuar mentioned the debates which took place on 31st July in both house of Parliament that express the unanimous wish of all English people to put an end the sufferings.¹⁶

“To the Archbishop of Belgrade,

Your Excellency – I have received a letter forwarded by you from the representatives of the Christian peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and addressed to the people of England. The original shall, as you request, be securely kept by me as a guarantee of the geniuses and good faith of the document . . . The tale which the document contains of atrocities committed must stir every Christian and every English heart. I cannot but trust that the instances to which you allude are exceptional and infrequent, in any case, I can assure your Excellency that there is and can be no wish in England to maintain a system which could be guilty of such acts, and that the earnest desire of the English Government and people is to do in their power to put an end to them . . . if your Excellency will read the debates which took place on the 31st July in both house of Parliament you will, I am sure, see that I am expressing the unanimous wish of all English people.

I shall be ready at all times to pay immediate attention to any further communication which your Excellency may make to me and beg to subscribe myself your brother in the Lord.

A.C. Cantuar, Primate of All England and Metropolitan.¹⁷

¹⁴ *The Guardian*, 30 August 1876, pp.1147-1148.

¹⁵ *The Guardian*, 30 August 1876, pp.1147-1148.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *The Guardian* 30 August 1876, pp. 1147-1148.

It is noteworthy that a number of distinguished English clergymen such as H.R. Liddon criticized Disraeli's position towards the Balkan states. Liddon was the Canon of St. Paul's Cathedral, and also a professor at Oxford. A powerful orator, Liddon delivered a sermon at St. Paul's Cathedral on August 13, 1876, on the theme of a Christian and human Eastern policy. He denounced Disraeli's arrogant policies at the expense of the South Slav population. Liddon's sermon was commented in the *Guardian* on August 16, 1876. His sermon opened another fierce debate about England and the Eastern Question.¹⁸

Tennyson's sonnet remains a lasting tribute to Montenegro and its people the "smallest among peoples" yet fearsome in their struggle for freedom:

O smallest among peoples! Rough rock-throne
Of Freedom . . .
Great Tsernagora! Never since thine own
Black ridges drew the cloud and brake the storm
Has breathed a race of mightier mountaineer.

Both Tennyson and in particular Gladstone stood on the side of the Southern Slavs admiring the spirit of human dignity yearning for freedom and offering generously their support during the dark days of the Eastern Crisis.

¹⁸ R.T. Shanon, *Gladstone and the Bulgarian Agitation 1876*, 2nd Edition, Connecticut, Archon 1975, p.61.