

The Mirshteg Reforms in Macedonia

by Gligor Todorovski (Macedonian Review, 2/1981)

The Mirshteg reforms of October 1903 are very important to the recent history of the Macedonian people. For that reason an enormous amount of material has been written about them, in several European languages. Archive documents (published or unpublished) include documents in French, Austrian, German, Italian, English and Swedish, dealing with the creation, development and end of the Mirshteg Reform Program for Macedonia. The acceptance of the Mirshteg Reform Program meant continuing the many long years of reforming European Turkey and solving the Eastern issue. Many European Powers and Balkan countries were engaged in solving this problem at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th. The reforms, as a need and demand of the era, became an important event in the history of subjugated European Turkey as well as of the entire Turkish Empire. Included was Macedonia, which made great efforts for its national and social liberation. Point 23 of the Berlin Agreement presented an international legal basis for any outside intervention in the Turkish Empire and thus in Macedonia, an integral part of the Empire. At the same time, this point of the Berlin Agreement functioned as an international legal act for the forces in Macedonia in their freedom struggle. On the other hand, toward the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century the Turkish Empire showed serious signs of collapse. The imperialistic countries gained more and more prestige in the agriculture of the Turkish Empire which meant that the Empire was becoming more economically and politically dependent on the great powers of the day. On the other hand, Macedonia's increasing presence in the European capitalistic market as well as her great geopolitical importance pre-conditioned her relations both with the great powers and her neighboring countries on the Balkan. The attitude of the great European powers, Austro-Hungary in particular, present a special issue. Having lost her influence in central Europe, Austro-Hungary began her expansion on the Balkan peninsula. There are many reasons why they always tried to maintain equilibrium of the forces there. The principle of "status quo" was accepted, which in this case concerned only Macedonia. The very hard economic and political situation towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century forced the Macedonian people to seek a way out of their hardships through revolutionary struggle. Their heroic and massive effort in the Ilinden Uprising in 1903 was the principle factor in

solving the Macedonian issue. There was a justified fear that the status quo might be disturbed. The slaughter of the rebellious population of Macedonia by the Turkish army and other armed irregular troops prompted European diplomatic efforts, especially Austro-Hungarian and Russian, to resolve the Macedonian issue. In Mirtschteg, Austria, on 2 October 1903, the Russian and Austro--Hungarian ministers for foreign affairs agreed that in addition to peace and order, reforms were needed in Macedonia. In accordance with the Mirtschteg Agreement, a mutual reform program was prepared and accepted by the other European powers including, finally, Turkey. The reform program contained nine points, and it made the Macedonian issue even more engaging. According to these points, among other things, two civilian representatives were appointed, representing Austro Hungary and Russia. They were supposed to assist and advise Hilmi Pasha, who was appointed by the Turkish government as head inspector in the three Macedonian vilayets (Skopje, Bitola and Salonica). They were to inspect the introduction of the reforms as well as the work of the Turkish administration. Based on the agreement by the European forces, especially Austro-Hungary and Turkey, the reform program had the following missions: to improve the administration and judiciary; to establish the mistreatment and abuse of the Turkish organs during the Ilinden Uprising; to estimate the damage suffered by the refugees who abandoned their destroyed homes; to work on repatriation of the refugees and reconstruction of the destroyed villages; to free the populace from paying taxes for a year; to remove the Turkish irregular armed forces. One of the most complex questions raised by Mirtschteg Reform Program was the reorganization of the Turkish police force. The most bitter complaints of the Macedonian people were addressed to the work of this force. Thus, a special commission was formed, headed by an Italian, General De Gorgis. Participating in its work were military representatives of France, Italy, England, Germany, Russia and Austria. Their task was to help De Gorgis reorganize the Turkish police force in the Macedonian vilayets. For this purpose Macedonia was divided into several sectors where selected military officers from the European powers were to carry out one of the most important points of the Mirtschteg Reform Program. At this time the European powers indicated their interest in particular Macedonian regions. Germany decided to establish military schools in Salonica. Bitola and Skopje particularly had a friendly attitude toward the Turkish Empire. The social, political and economic situation in Macedonia required further continuation of the Macedonian reforms which were to be completed within two years and which now also covered the departments of finance, judiciary, and administration. Turkey strongly protested this decision, particularly the program's concern with the finances in the Macedonian

vilayets. It meant recognizing the Macedonian vilayets as autonomous units, or, in other words, giving autonomy to Macedonia as a whole.

Turkey found itself under great pressure from the European powers (the Bleet's demonstrations in Salonica in 1905 as well as diplomatic pressure) who insisted that it accept their decision concerning the enlargement of the reform program which, as a matter of fact, was suggested by the Mirschteg Reform Program. Finally Turkey yielded. But the reforms could neither solve the numerous problems nor could they do away with the great defects and oppositions within the administration as well as in the political and economic system of the Turkish Empire. The Mirschteg Reform Program failed to bring the results that it was designed for. Constantinople's rulers were not really willing to change the Macedonian situation. The other Balkan countries also hindered the introduction of the reforms because they hoped to conquer Macedonia. All this was compounded by the opposing interests and attitudes of the other European powers at the time when the reforms were being introduced.

Particularly important were the reforms for Macedonia decided on by England and Russia at the meeting of their sovereigns in Reval (Talin, today's capital of the Socialist Republic of Estonia) in 1908. According to these reforms Macedonia was to gain autonomy. This was the real cause of the Young Turkish Revolution that began in 1908.

After the Young Turkish Revolution the situation in Macedonia was such that officers could not carry on the reform program. Toward the end of 1909 they abandoned the program, and so the decisions of the Raval meeting were never enacted.

The Mirschteg Reforms did not bring satisfactory results. They resulted from Macedonia's revolutionary movement and the diplomatic speculations of the large imperialistic countries. They were not devised to radically change the constitution of the Turkish Empire, but instead to improve, "to a certain degree", the general situation by reforming the administration, police, the finance department and the judiciary. Their task was to heal the chronic diseases in the Empire through periodic reforms, while, at the same, allowing the Empire to maintain its integrity. Still it was a direct interference in the domestic affairs of the Empire; the Turkish administration was controlled by foreign civil servants, and foreign officers were reorganizing the police force. Regardless of their practical benefits, all these activities degraded the sultan's authority and the sovereignty of the Turkish Empire to a certain degree.

On the other hand, the Mirschteg Reform Program prevented, for a time, the other foreign powers from either splitting or occupying Macedonian territory. It acquainted Europe with the situation in Macedonia, and the Macedonian people were recognized as a force that was not afraid to fight just like the other Balkan nations. Europe's interference in the state affairs of Turkey through the Mirschteg Reform Program indirectly recognized and affirmed the Macedonian national liberation movement that prompted this intervention. It also contributed to Macedonia's recognition in international affairs at the beginning of the 20th century.