

Araştırma Makalesi

How to Lost a War: Strategic Command Faults and Defeat in the Ottoman- Russian War of 1877-1878

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Abstract

Considering the results of the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-1878, it was one of the most important wars in the Ottoman history. The war was a tough exam for the Ottoman army, but the defeat could not be prevented. The most important reason for defeat was the mistakes made in strategic command. The Ottoman war plan was prepared on the basis of wrong predictions and important mistakes were made in the deployment of the forces. These mistakes allowed the Russian army to easily cross the Danube. Ottoman decision makers could not take precautions in time and the Russian army was able to seize the Balkan passes quickly. The mistakes in the strategic command continued throughout the war. A multi-headed system was created

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for the command of the war, and it was not possible to establish a unity of command. In addition, incompatibility and personal struggles among the commanders at the front paralyzed the command system. Under these conditions, it was not possible for the Ottoman forces to carry out a coordinated operation. The only significant success of the Ottoman army on the Balkan Front was the defense of Pleven. With the defeat the Ottoman rule in the Balkans was largely eliminated.

Keywords: Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-1878, Balkan Front, Strategic Command, Pleven, Shipka.

Bir Savaş Nasıl Kaybedilir:

1877-1878 Osmanlı-Rus Harbinde Stratejik Komuta Hataları ve Mağlubiyet

Öz

1877-1878 Osmanlı-Rus Harbi, Osmanlı tarihinin en önemli savaşlarından biri olmuştur. Osmanlı ordusu savaşta iyi bir sınav verememiş ve mağlup olmuştur. Mağlubiyetin en önemli sebebi stratejik komutada yapılan hatalar olmuştur. Osmanlı savaş planı yanlış öngörüler üstüne hazırlanmış ve bu plana göre kuvvetlerin konuşlanmasında önemli hatalar yapılmıştır. Bu hatalar Rus ordusunun kolaylıkla Tuna nehrini geçmesine imkân sağlamıştır. Osmanlı karar alıcıları zamanında tedbir alamamış ve Rus ordusu çok kısa süre içerisinde Balkan geçitlerini ele geçirebilmiştir. Harbin yönetimi için çok başlı bir sistem yaratılmış, emir komuta birliğini tesis etmek mümkün olmamıştır. Ayrıca cephedeki komutanlar arasında hüküm süren uyumsuzluk ve kişisel mücadeleler emir komuta sistemini felç etmiştir. Bu koşullarda Osmanlı kuvvetlerinin koordineli bir harekât yapması mümkün olmamıştır. Osmanlı ordusunun Balkan Cephesi'ndeki kayda değer tek başarısı beş ay süren Plevne müdafaası olmuştur. Harp sonunda gelen mağlubiyetle Balkanlardaki Osmanlı hâkimiyeti büyük oranda ortadan kalkmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: 1877-1878 Osmanlı-Rus Harbi, Balkan Cephesi, Stratejik Komuta, Plevne, Şipka.

Introduction

One of the most difficult exam given by the Ottoman army in the 19th century was the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-1878 (namely the 93 War). The main reason for the war was the pan-slavist policies

followed by Russia and the nationalism movement that gained strength in the Balkans. The war took place on two fronts, the Caucasus and the Balkans. However, the center of gravity was the Balkan Front and the outcome of the war was taken here. In the Caucasus Front, the Ottoman army under the command of Gazi Ahmet Muhtar Pasha had a tough fight against the Russians and gained important successes. However, in the last months of the war, defeats followed each other and a large area up to Erzurum fell under Russian occupation until the armistice.

Before the war, the Ottoman Empire gathered a large force on the Balkan Front. However, the mistakes made in the war plan and deployment did not allow this force to be utilized properly. Ottoman soldiers fought heroically throughout the war and some tactical successes were achieved. Especially the defense of Pleven had repercussions all over the world. However, mistakes made at the strategic command level determined the outcome of the war and the Russian advance could only be stopped in front of Istanbul with the intervention of England.

There is an extensive literature on the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-1878. The defeat has been a subject studied by some Ottoman authors, especially the officers. In addition, the memories of the commanders who were in the decision-making position and the defenses of those who were tried in the court of war are important sources. Besides, the observations of foreign journalists in the region during the war contain valuable information. The memories of foreign doctors, who served in the Ottoman army during the war, are other important sources. Finally there are extensive studies written by European and American researchers right after the war. In modern studies, the defense of Pleven has been emphasized and the reasons for the defeat have not been adequately addressed.

The aim of this study is to evaluate the defeat in the Balkan Front in the context of strategic command. Thus, the history of this important war can be carried beyond the heroic stories. In this context, first of all, the political process leading to the war will be discussed. Then, the strength, operational plans and strategic deployments of both armies

will be examined. Finally the strategic command of the war will be analyzed in two phases, and faults will be evaluated.

The Political Process Leading to the War

The events leading up to the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-1878 started with the conflicts in the Balkans. The pan-slavist policies followed by Russia increased the tension in the region. The rebellion, which started in Herzegovina in July 1875, quickly expanded and spread to Bosnia. While the Ottoman Empire was dealing with this problem, a new uprising started in Bulgaria in May 1876. The Bulgarian events were reflected in the European public opinion as a Muslim-Christian conflict and became an European issue.¹ The situation of the Ottoman Empire gave Serbia and Montenegro the opportunity they were waiting for. These two principalities started a war with the Ottoman Empire in July. There were about five thousand Russian volunteers in the Serbian army under the command of Russian General M.G.Cherniaev.²

Ottoman forces could not get a decisive victory against the Montenegrin army. However, he managed to defeat the Serbian army in the Battle of Aleksinac. The Belgrade road was opened to the Ottoman army. St.Petersburg which disturbed by this situation, issued an ultimatum on October 31 to stop the war. The Tsar ordered the mobilization of six corps in the area near the Romanian border. The Ottoman government, worried about Russia's threat of war, agreed to an armistice with Serbia. At this stage London, which wanted to prevent Russia from handling the issue alone, took action. With the proposal of London, it was decided to discuss the Balkan issues at an interstate conference. The Ottoman government, which was reluctant to be alone with Russia, accepted this offer reluctantly.³

¹ Mahmud Celaleddin Paşa, *Mir'at-ı Hakikat*, Berekat Yayınevi, İstanbul 1983, p. 133-136.

²Barbara Jelavich, *History Of The Balkans, Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries I*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995, p. 352-355.

³ Yuluğ Tekin Kurat, "1877-1878 Osmanlı-Rus Harbinin Sebepleri", *Belleten*, 26/104, (1962), p. 584-586; Francis Vinton Greene, *Russian Army and its Campaigns in Turkey in 1877-1878*, D.Appleton&Company, New York 1879, p. 139.

The Istanbul Conference, which gathered to discuss the Balkan issues, was opened on 23 December 1876. The decisions made at the end of the conference were quite heavy for Istanbul. The Ottoman Empire would make a peace treaty with Serbia and Montenegro that included border corrections in favor of these two states. Bulgaria would be divided into two provinces, and extensive concessions would be given to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bulgaria. The governors of Bulgaria and Bosnia-Herzegovina would be appointed by the vote of the Great Powers. The governor of Bulgaria would be chosen among the Christians. And a commission would be established from the representatives of the Great Powers to oversee the reform.⁴

On January 18, a general assembly was convened under the chairmanship of Grand Vizier Mithat Pasha to discuss the conference proposals and reach a decision. More than two hundred delegates attended this assembly including soldiers, bureaucrats, Muslim and non-Muslim clergyman. According to the prevailing opinion in the assembly, the conference proposals greatly restricted the sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire. Moreover It was obvious that such a reform would pave the way for independence for Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bulgaria. As a matter of fact, it was decided to reject the proposals at all costs.⁵

Upon this decision, the İstanbul Conference ended on January 20 and the delegates left Istanbul. The Ottoman Empire signed a peace treaty with Serbia on February 28. However, the footsteps of the approaching war could be heard. The states participating in the Istanbul Conference came together in London in March and signed a protocol. According to the London Protocol, a peace agreement would be made with Montenegro, reforms would be implemented in Bosnia - Herzegovina and Bulgaria, and the mobilization of the Ottoman army would be terminated. If these conditions were to be fulfilled, the Russians would also put an end to the mobilization. Istanbul once

⁴ Enver Ziya Karal, *Osmanlı Tarihi VIII, Birinci Meşrutiyet ve İstibdat Devirleri (1876-1908)*, Türk Tarih Kurumu, Ankara 2007, p. 31-32; F.A.K. Yasamee, *Ottoman Diplomacy, Abdülhamid II and the Great Powers, 1878-1888*, Gorgias Press, New Jersey 2011, p. 16.

⁵ Mahmud Celaleddin Paşa, *op. cit.*, p. 217-219.

again refused the demands. Thereupon, Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire on April 24.⁶

Operational Plans, Deployment and Comparison of Forces

Until a month before the start of the war, the Ottoman army did not have an operation plan against Russia. The Ottoman operation plan was prepared only at the end of March. Therefore, there was not enough time left to develop the details of the plan and make the necessary preparations. It was discussed that the Ottoman forces would pass to the north of the Danube and meet the Russians there. However, for diplomatic reasons, they did not dare to enter Romanian territory.⁷ According to the terms of the Paris Agreement, both the Ottoman Empire and Russia were forbidden to bring soldiers into Romania. But the Russians did not take this into account. As of April 24, Russian troops crossed the border and began to advance towards the deployment areas inside Romania. Thereupon, the Principality of Romania formed an alliance with Russia and declared its independence on May 21.⁸

According to the Ottoman plan, most of the forces were to be deployed in Shumen, Varna, Silistra and Ruse. Another part of the forces were to be deployed at Vidin, on the western flank of the front. A third group of forces were to be deployed between Sofia and Siliven. In addition, an important force would be deployed outside the operational area against the threat from Serbia, Montenegro and Greece.⁹ According to this concentration, the Danube river was the first line and the Balkan mountains were the second line of defense.

The Commander of the Balkan Front was Müşir Abdülkerim Nadir Pasha.¹⁰ He was in Shumen with his headquarters. The units under the

⁶ Akdes Nimet Kurat, *Türkiye ve Rusya*, Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları, Ankara 1990, p. 82.

⁷ H.Hikmet Süer, *1877-1878 Osmanlı-Rus Harbi Rumeli Cephesi*, Genelkurmay Basımevi, Ankara 1993, p. 51-52

⁸ Henry Montague Hozier, *The Russo-Turkish War I*, William Mackenzie, London 1878, p. 336.

⁹ Süer, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

¹⁰ Abdülkerim Pasha was a former soldier who was over seventy at that time. He spoke little and moved slowly. He did not have the ability to make quick decisions, which are the basic principles of modern warfare, and to make changes in plans according to

command of Abdülkerim Pasha were the Danube Eastern Army, the Danube Western Army, the Silistra, Ruse, Varna Castle Commands, and the Sofia and Sliven Commands. The Eastern Army stationed in Shumen was under the command of Müşir Ahmet Eyüp Pasha. The Western Army was stationed in Vidin and was headed by Osman Nuri Pasha.¹¹

The Ottoman mobilization began on 6 November 1876. But the gathering and deployment of troops was slow. By the end of June, the Ottoman force at the front had reached 186.000 men, including 189 infantry battalions, 12.000 cavalry and 360 cannons.¹² 50 battalions were in Shumen under the command of Ahmed Eyüb Pasha, and 50 battalions were in Vidin under the command of Osman Pasha. There were 30 battalions in Ruse, 20 battalions in Silistra, 12 battalions in Varna, 4 battalions in Tirnovo and 6 battalions in Svishtov. There were also 10 battalions in the Balkan passes and Kazanlak. In addition, 107.000 men (80 battalions) were deployed against Serbia and Montenegro in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Shkodra, and 15.000 men (24 battalions) were deployed in Ioannina against Greece. There were 40 battalions in Istanbul as a reserve.¹³

In addition to these forces, there was a fleet of 2 armored corvettes, 7 armored gunboats, 4 wooden gunboats and 15 steamboats on the Danube river. The Ottoman Danube Fleet was dispersed to regions considered strategically important. Abdulkerim Pasha thought that this fleet would play a very important role in the defense of the river. But his expectation would not come true. It was a big mistake to replace Hüseyin Pasha, who had been in charge of the fleet for a long time and knew the river very well, just before the battle. Arif Pasha, who was appointed to his place, arrived late and

developing situations. However, due to his age and seniority, he was respected by his unit commanders and his orders were obeyed. Ahmed Saib, *Son Osmanlı-Rus Muharebesi*, Hindiye Matbaası, Cairo 1327 (1911), p. 15.

¹¹ Süer, *op. cit.*, p. 72-73.

¹² Erkan-ı Harbiye Kolağalarından Reşid, *1293 Osmanlı-Rus Sefer-i Ahiri*, Kayhan Yayınları, İstanbul 2016, p. 29; Süer, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

¹³ Ahmed Midhat Efendi, *Zübdetü'l Hakayık, 93 Harbi'nin Arka Planı*, Türk Tarih Kurumu, Ankara 2015, p. 144; Ahmed Saib, *op. cit.*, p. 10-13, 97.

could not take the necessary precautions.¹⁴ The Russians restricted the movement of the Ottoman fleet and caused serious damage, both with artillery fire, mine lines and torpedo attacks.¹⁵

Ottoman troops were deployed very scattered in the Balkans. In this conditions it was not possible to concentrate forces at one point to create a center of gravity. Due to the large force deployed against Serbia, Montenegro and Greece, the Ottoman force at the front was weak compared to the Russian army. An important obstacle such as the Danube was not sufficiently utilized, and the points that were likely to be crossed by the Russians were not held with sufficient force. The main force of the army was concentrated in the forts. There were not enough forces in the directions of Svishtov-Tırnovo, Svishtov-Gabrovo and Nikopol-Pleven-Sevlievo, which went from the Danube to the Balkan passes. Abdülkerim Pasha thought that the Russians would cross the Danube from the region between Ruse and Nikopol. However, he believed that he could not prevent the advance of the Russian army with his available forces. Therefore, he concentrated most of his forces in fortified positions. He believed that the Russians crossing the Danube would not go south without surrendering the Ruse and Silistra fortresses, as in previous battles. He planned to fight in the region between Ruse, Silistra and Shumen. However, Abdülkerim Pasha's expectation would not come true. It was very difficult for the Ottoman forces, which were positioned in the castles to the east of the Balkan Front, to stop the Russian operation that would advance from Svishtov to the south.¹⁶

The Russian plan was to cross the Danube between Ruse and Nikopol without colliding with the strongly held Ottoman fortresses. In

¹⁴ Mustafa Öztürk, "1877-1878 Osmanlı-Rus Harbi Belgeleri: Abdi Paşa'nın Muhakemesi", *Belgeler*, 23/27, (2003), p. 125-126; Süer, *op. cit.*, p. 71

¹⁵ Erkan-ı Harbiye Kolağalarından Reşid, *op. cit.*, p. 84-85.

¹⁶ Keçecizade İzzet Fuat, *Kaçırılan Fırsatlar, 1877-1878 Osmanlı-Rus Savaşı Hakkında Eleştiriler ve Askerî Düşünceler*, Genelkurmay Basımevi, Ankara 1997, p. 15-16. Abdülkerim Pasha was tried in the court of war after he was dismissed. In his defense, he said that he had only 170 battalions to defend the Danube and that he had warned the Chief of Staff Mahmud Pasha that this force was insufficient. According to Abdülkerim Pasha, İstanbul did not give the necessary importance to the Balkan Front. Öztürk, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

order to hide the main crossing area and divert the attention of the Ottoman army, a secondary force would cross the Danube from the Galati-Macin region and enter Dobruja and advance to the Constanta line. The main attacking force, after crossing the river, would advance rapidly to the south, seize the Balkan passes, and advance in the direction of Edirne to divide the Ottoman forces into two parts. The Russian general headquarters wanted to be victorious in a short time by advancing rapidly to Istanbul. Thus, Britain and France would not have a chance to intervene militarily or diplomatically against Russia. According to the plan, the 8th, 9th, 12th and 13th corps, constituting the bulk of the Russian army, were positioned in front of Nikopol-Svishtov. While the 11th corps was gathered against Silistra, the 14th corps was positioned against Galati.¹⁷

The Russian force gathered at the front was about 200.000 men, including 182 infantry battalions, 204 cavalry squadrons and 858 cannons.¹⁸ According to Ottoman sources, the Russian army had 275.000 infantry, 20.000 cavalry and 756 cannons.¹⁹ The army was commanded by the Tsar's brother, Grand Duke Nichola.

When the strength of the two armies is compared, it is seen that the Russian army is superior in terms of the number of soldiers. The number of cannons in the Ottoman army was about half that of the Russians. In terms of the number of cavalry, the Russians had an absolute superiority.²⁰ This was a major disadvantage. Cavalry units played a very important role in the war tactics of the period. Cavalry units with high mobility were of decisive importance in types of operations that required speed such as reconnaissance, encirclement, outflanking and pursuit operations. In order to eliminate this deficiency, *muavene* cavalry units (commonly known as *başıbozuk*) were formed from the immigrant Circassian tribes. The fact that the *muavene* cavalrymen joined the army with their own horses offered

¹⁷ Bruce W. Menning, *Bayonets Before Bullets, The Imperial Russian Army 1861-1914*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis, p. 52-55.

¹⁸ Frederick Maurice, *The Russo-Turkish War 1877*, Swan Sonnenschein&Co., London 1905, p. 25; Greene, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

¹⁹ Sürer, *op. cit.*, p. 48; According to B.W.Menning, the number of the Russian army is approximately 260.000. Menning, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

²⁰ Greene, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

an important advantage for the Ottoman army, which was generally suffering from animal shortages.²¹ However, the combat effectiveness of the *muavene* cavalry units was quite low. These units were not acting in military discipline. They could not properly carry out the reconnaissance service, which is one of the most important duties of the cavalry units. With the rush to plunder, their order was being broken in the battles. The Ottoman commanders at the front would complain a lot about this situation.²²

The weapons used by the Ottoman army were better than the Russians. Thanks to the extensive purchases made during the reign of Sultan Abdulaziz, the troops were equipped with modern and high quality weapons. The main weakness of the army was the lack of qualified officers. Since the beginning of the century, important steps have been taken to develop the military education system. However, at that time, military schools still could not train enough officers. For this reason, the number of officers with the skills and qualifications to command their troops deftly was insufficient.²³ Uneducated officers, which was not graduated from military schools, constituted 90% of the officer corps. Some of them could not read or write at all. Only 45 of the 70 pashas, who commanded the army during the war, were military school graduates. In the lower ranks, the proportion of educated officers was even lower. These uneducated officers did not have the technical and tactical knowledge required by modern warfare. The number of staff officers in the entire Ottoman army consisted of 132.²⁴

²¹ Mehmet Beşikçi, "Başıbozuk Savaşçıdan 'Makbul' Tebaaya: 1877-1878 Osmanlı-Rus Savaşı'nda Osmanlı Ordusunda Çerkez Muhacirler", *Hacettepe Üniversitesi Türkiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 23, (2015), p. 102.

²² Hüseyin Raci Efendi, *Zağra Müftüsünün Anıları, Tarihçe-i Vak'a-ı Zağra*, Tercüman, p. 153; Ali İhsan Gencer-Nedim İpek, "1877-1878 Osmanlı-Rus Harbi Rumeli Cephesi Vesikalari (Temmuz 1877)", *Belgeler*, 25/19, (1993), p. 233.

²³ Mesut Uyar- Edward J.Erickson, *A Military History of The Ottomans, From Osman to Atatürk*, Praeger Security International, California 2009, p. 177.

²⁴ Gültekin Yıldız, "Kara Kuvvetleri", *Osmanlı Askeri Tarihi: Kara, Deniz ve Hava Kuvvetleri, 1792-1918*, Timaş Yayınları, İstanbul 2013, p. 67; *Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri Tarihi, 1877 -1878 Osmanlı-Rus Harbi Kafkas Cephesi Harekâtı II*, Genelkurmay Basımevi, Ankara 1985, p. 43.

The Ottoman commanders were having trouble in command of the troops. Because they had little preparation and experience until they came to command posts. Commanders of all levels were faced with many situations for the first time during the campaign, as the army did not conduct exercises and maneuvers in peacetime. Some experience was gained in the wars of Serbia and Montenegro. But this was only limited to the troops that participated in these wars. As a matter of fact, the experience of commanding the troops could only be gained in the campaign, but the experience gained on the battlefield came at a heavy price.²⁵

The biggest problem of the Ottoman army was in the strategic command system. As it is known, Müşir Abdülkerim Nadir Pasha was appointed as the Front Commander. However, II. Abdülhamit did not intend to leave the command of the war to Abdülkerim Pasha. As a matter of fact, a war council (*Meclis-i Umuru Harbiye*) was established in Istanbul on May 24. The war council consisted of Chief of General Staff, Minister of the Navy and some other military personnel.²⁶

While the members of the council were elected, their loyalty to the Sultan was taken into account rather than their military careers. For this reason, it was not possible for the pashas in the military council to oppose the Sultan's wishes. The Sultan, who closely followed all the events on the front line, would try to command the war from Istanbul through the war council. However, the distance from Istanbul to the front headquarters was more than 450 kilometers. Communication facilities between the front and Istanbul were extremely limited. It was not possible for the situation at the front to reach Istanbul on time and clearly. A three-headed system was created for the management of the war. The Sultan and the military council would constantly interfere with the decisions of the Front Commander. The commanders at the front would not be able to react quickly and would have to get approval from Istanbul for all their decisions. The decisions taken by the Sultan and the council members, who did not know the real situation at the front, would have a negative effect on the command

²⁵ Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Paşa, *Anılar-2, Sergüzeşt-i Hayatımın Cild-i Sanisi*, Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, İstanbul 1996, p. 80.

²⁶ BOA, İ.DH., 748/61133.

of the war. As a matter of fact, the confusion of strategic command could not be overcome until the end of the war.²⁷

From the Beginning of the War to the Third Battle of Plevn

The Russian army entered Romanian territory on April 24 and completed its deployment within two months. On the other hand, the Ottoman army made no attempt to restrict and prevent the activities of its enemy in Romania. The destruction of the Barboshi bridge, which the Russians had to use to cross the Seret River, was important in slowing the movement of the enemy. This measure was considered by the Ottoman headquarters, but the Russians were more agile and succeeded in seizing the bridge.²⁸ The Ottoman army remained motionless throughout the Russian deployment. Reconnaissance operations were not carried out in the north of the Danube, and spies were not used properly. Ottoman commanders were largely unaware of the Russian preparations north of the river.²⁹

The operation started with the Russian troops (25.000 men and 108 guns) crossing the Danube and entering Dobrudja on 22 June. It was a deception. The Russians wanted to draw the attention of the Ottomans to Dobruja. The task of the force that entered Dobruja was to advance to the Constanta line and ensure the safety of the Russian army in Romania. The Ottoman force in the region (15.000 men and 40 cannons) could not prevent the river crossing and quickly retreated to the Constanta line.³⁰ The Russian army had easily reached its target at east of the Danube.

On the other hand, the Russian troops deployed against Svishtov approached the Danube and started to cross the river on 26 June. Thanks to the imprudence of the Ottoman troops in Svishtov, the Russians had crossed the river much more easily than they had

²⁷ Mahmud Celeleddin Paşa, *op. cit.*, p. 310; Uyar-Erickson, *op. cit.*, p. 183-184.

²⁸ Augustus Charles Hobart-Hampden, *Hobart Pasha*, Nelson Doubleday, New York 1915, p. 220.

²⁹ Mehmed Hulusi, *Niçin Mağlub Olduk: 1877-78 Osmanlı-Rus Seferi: Avrupa Cephesindeki Harekât*, Kayhan Yayınları, İstanbul 2021, p. 74.

³⁰ Erkan-ı Harbiye Kolağalarından Reşid, *op. cit.*, p. 38; Tsenko Genov, "Military Operations in the Balkan Theatre during the 1877-78 War", *Southeastern Europe/L'Europe Du Sud-Est*, 6, Pt.2, (1979), p. 139.

expected. The Ottoman forces (4000 men), who could not resist in Svishtov, had to withdraw to Tirnovo in a short time. The Russians completed the construction of a bridge on July 2, and succeeded in passing a large amount of forces across the Danube. Russian troops advanced rapidly to the south and captured Tirnovo on 7 July.³¹

The Ottoman defense could not react effectively during the river crossing, which was the most critical stage of the Russian operation. The Ottoman troops in the region were not strong enough and were not well commanded. The commanders had a tendency to withdraw immediately in the face of enemy pressure. Abdulkерim Pasha should have acted quickly. Because the Russian forces, which were able to cross the Danube until July 2, were relatively weak. It was obvious that the Russian force crossing the river would increase in a short time. Under these conditions, it was possible to move towards Svishtov with the troops in Ruse and Nikopol. During this time Ottoman attacks could put the Russians in a very difficult position. Thus, time would be gained for the forces in Shumen to catch up and the Russians could be prevented from crossing the Danube. But the Front Commander missed this opportunity by remaining inactive.³²

Grand Duke Nikola did not face the difficulties he expected in the Danube. He was thinking of advancing swiftly to the Balkan passes with the majority of his forces while securing his flanks with secondary forces. However, the Tsar was concerned about the Ottoman deployment in Shumen and the forces in the fortresses. Therefore, he stopped the advance until the Russian troops in Romania had crossed the river. After completing the river crossing, the Russian army was to divide into three groups and continue its operation. While the central group (8th Corps) was advancing towards the Balkan passes, the left flank group (XII and XIII Corps) would advance west and hold the

³¹ R.Grant Barnwell, *The Russo-Turkish War*, John E. Potter And Company, Philadelphia 1877, s. 481-484; Maurice, *op. cit.*, p. 61-65.

³² Abdulkерim Pasha, in his defense at the Court of War, said that the Russians mainly planned to cross the Danube through Tutrakan, that he prevented this with the measures he took and that they had to pass through Svishtov. He stated that he thought the operation in Svishtov might be a deception, that he was waiting for the main operation in Ruse, and that there was not enough force in Ruse to reinforce Svishtov. Öztürk, *op. cit.*, p. 129-130.

Yantra line. Thus, it would cover the operation of the central group against the Ottoman forces in Shumen and Ruse. On the other hand, the right flank group (9th Corps) was going to occupy Nikopol and Pleven against a possible operation of Osman Pasha corps in Vidin.³³ This pause in the Russian advance was an important opportunity. However, Abdülkerim Pasha would not be able to take advantage of this opportunity.

While the Russian operation continued, the Ottoman forces in Shumen and Ruse (the Danube Eastern Army) remained inactive. However, while a small part of the Russian troops had crossed the Danube, the Danube Eastern Army could have prevented the crossing and threatened the left flank of the Russian troops advancing south. With an effective attack, the Russian forces could be split in two and their withdrawal paths could be cut off. However, Abdülkerim Pasha remained motionless in hesitation. He left the initiative entirely to the Russians. Istanbul, on the other hand, was worried about the Russian advance. Abdülkerim Pasha, who had to act on the orders of the Sultan himself, dispatched a corps (34 battalions and 40 cavalry squadrons) from Shumen to Byala on 3 July.³⁴ This force under the command of Ahmet Eyüp Pasha engaged in battle with the Russian forces in the east of Byala on 9 July. However, Abdülkerim Pasha panicked and ordered a withdrawal to Shumen on 11 July.³⁵

The advance force of the Russian central group was under the command of General Gurko. As a result of the reconnaissance he had made from Tirnovo, Gurko learned that the Hainköy strait was defended with a very weak force. The Russians took advantage of this

³³ Greene, *op. cit.*, p. 164; Menning, *op. cit.*, p. 57-58.

³⁴ Abdülkerim Pasha, in his defense in the court of war, said that he planned to prevent the Russians from reaching the Balkan passes by sending his force to Omurtag. However, Istanbul intervened and demanded that the forces be dispatched in the direction of Svishtov. Abdülkerim Pasha complained that he could not take the measures he thought because of such interventions. Öztürk, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

³⁵ Mehmed Hulusi, *op. cit.*, p. 100-102; Süer, *op. cit.*, p. 134-137; According to the decision taken by Abdülkerim Pasha together with Serasker Redif Pasha and Nazım Pasha, the Ahmet Eyüp Pasha corps would not advance on the enemy, but would retreat and draw the enemy on itself. Gencer-İpek, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

opportunity and captured the pass on 14 July.³⁶ Russian troops advanced south from the Hainköy pass and captured Kazanlak on 17 July. The main goal for the Russians was to capture the Shipka pass. Russian attacks, from Gabrovo on 17 July and from the south on 18 July to Shipka pass, had failed. However, the weak Ottoman force defending Shipka withdrew on the night of 18/19 July and emptied the pass. The strategically important Shipka pass was captured by the Russians on 19 July. Russian troops entered the Stara Zagora on July 22.³⁷ Thus, the road to the south of the Balkan Mountains was opened.

The Sultan was panicked by the news from the front and sent the Chief of General Staff Redif Pasha and Nazım Pasha to the front. Redif Pasha, who came to Shumen on July 4, said in the reports he sent to the Sultan that the army did not have enough strength and supported Abdülkerim Pasha's decision to stay on the defensive.³⁸ The Sultan, who lost his patience in the face of the defeats, dismissed Abdülkerim and Redif Pashas from their duties on 17 July. On July 21, Mehmet Ali Pasha was appointed as the General Commander of the Danube Armies and Süleyman Pasha as the Balkan Commander.³⁹ Abdülkerim and Redif Pashas were tried in the court of war and sentenced to exile.

The first target of the Russian right flank group (IX Corps) was Nikopol. There was an Ottoman force of 10.000 men in the city under the command of Hasan Pasha. Osman Pasha had informed Hasan Pasha that he would come to help in a few days while he was leaving Vidin. The Russians attacked on July 15, but could not capture the city. However, Hasan Pasha panicked and surrendered on 16 July. The Russians had captured 7000 prisoners in Nikopol. After two days of preparation, the Russians dispatched a force to Pleven on 18 July.⁴⁰ However, they were late.

³⁶ Nikolay Epanchin, *Operations of General Gurko's Advance Guard in 1877*, çev.H.Havelock, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner Co., London 1900, p. 54-64 .

³⁷ Barnwell, *op. cit.*, p. 504-507; Alexander Statiev, "The Thorns of the Wild Rose: Russian Ordeals at the Shipka Pass During the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878", *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 32/3, p. 369-371.

³⁸ The Ottoman Ministry of War evaluated the strength of the Russian army, which attacked from the Danube, as 160.000-180.000. BOA, A.}MKT.MHM., 481/100.

³⁹ Ahmed Midhat Efendi, *op. cit.*, p. 204-207.

⁴⁰ Greene, *op. cit.*, p. 185-189.

The Ottoman Danube Western Army remained motionless in Vidin, although the Russians crossed the Danube in the first days of the war. Osman Pasha offered to the Front Commander to go to Pleven with his forces, to meet with the Nikopol forces there, and then to attack Svishtov in coordination with the Danube Eastern Army. Abdülkerim Pasha, who did not want to leave Vidin defenseless, did not accept this offer. However, due to the rapid advance of the Russian army, he changed his mind and ordered Osman Pasha to advance to Pleven. However, a telegram from Istanbul delayed Osman Pasha's advance for a few days. The intelligence that the Russians would attack Vidin would not turn out to be true. Osman Pasha departed from Vidin with most of his forces on 13 July. On the way, he learned that Nikopol had fallen and reached Pleven on 19 July after a difficult 190-kilometers walk. Pleven was located at the crossroads of the roads leading to western Bulgaria and the Balkan passes.⁴¹ The deployment of a strong Ottoman unit in the city was threatening the right flank of the Russian forces advancing south. The Russians (13.000 infantry, 3 cavalry regiments and 60 guns) were able to reach the city on 20 July and attacked immediately. However, Osman Pasha (27 battalions, 1 cavalry regiment and 46 guns) defeated the Russians and forced them to withdraw. Russian casualties were over 2700. If the retreating troops were followed, the Russian defeat would have turned into a rout. However, after days of marching, the soldiers were exhausted and Osman Pasha did not have enough cavalry forces. Osman Pasha immediately sent a force and took Lovech back.⁴² The First Battle of Pleven had been an important turning point in the war. For the first time, the Ottoman forces were able to stop a strong Russian attack and forced them to retreat.

The defeat in Pleven greatly disturbed the Tsar. Grand Duke Nichola attempted to gather a new force to remove this obstacle that

⁴¹ The city of Pleven was located at the intersection of five critical roads. These ways; Nikopol-Pleven road, Ruse-Byala-Pleven road, Plovdiv-Lovech-Pleven road, Sofia-Orhanie-Pleven road and Vidin-Pleven road. Ahmet Cemal (Cemal Pasha), *Plevne Müdafaası*, Ötüken, İstanbul 2020, p. 39.

⁴² Albay Talat, *Plevne Savunması*, Genelkurmay Basımevi, Ankara 1997, p. 4-12; Von Der Goltz, *Plevne: Tarih-i Harpten Asakir-i Redife Kismına Dair Tedkikat*, Mahmud Bey Matbaası, İstanbul 1316 (1898), p. 4-13; Maurice, *op. cit.*, p. 106-113.

threatened the right flank of his army as soon as possible. The force gathered under the command of General Krudener was 30.000 men, including 36 battalions, 30 cavalry squadrons and 176 cannons.⁴³ On the other hand, Osman Pasha began to fortify the city. The force in Pleven was about 20.000 men, including 33 battalions, 5 cavalry squadrons and 300 Circassian volunteers. Before the attack on the city, General Krudener wanted to take control of the Pleven-Sevlievo-Tirnovo road by seizing Lovech. However, his attack on Lovech on 28 July was unsuccessful. Thereupon, General Krudener attacked Pleven on 30 July. But he was defeated again. Russian casualties amounted to 7000 men. If the panicked Russian troops had been pursued, the defeat would have turned into a rout. But Osman Pasha had very little cavalry and his troops were exhausted in battle.⁴⁴

The Russians, who had been advancing easily since the beginning of the war, were defeated twice in Pleven. The effect of the defeat spread to the entire army. The Russian General Headquarters was very concerned about this situation. In these circumstances, Grand Duke Nichola wanted to attack again quickly. However, the Tsar did not approve of this. The Russians were also under the pressure of the Ottoman Danube Eastern Army in the east and the Balkan Corps in the south. If the forces gathered in front of Pleven and were defeated once again, the Russian army would be defenseless against the Ottoman forces in the east and south. In this situation, the Tsar decided to bring reinforcements from Russia. In addition, the Romanian army would participate in the Pleven campaign.⁴⁵ There would be no operation to Pleven until reinforcements were gathered. Throughout August, the Russians were busy with the attacks of Süleyman Pasha and Mehmet Ali Pasha.

During the days of the Pleven defeat, bad news was also coming from the south of the Balkans for the Russians. While General Gurko captured the Balkan passes in mid-July, the Ottoman forces in Sliven and Nova Zagora remained inactive. Having captured Shipka, the

⁴³ Hozier, *op. cit.*, p. 591; Greene, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

⁴⁴ İbrahim Edhem, *Plevne Hatıraları*, İstanbul 1979, p. 44-46; Süer, *op. cit.*, p. 230-247; Mehmed Hulusi, *op. cit.*, p. 136-138; Menning, *op. cit.*, p. 62-64.

⁴⁵ Greene, *op. cit.*, p. 203-205.

Russian troops were advancing towards the Nova Zagora. It seemed that the road to Edirne was opened for the Russians. However, the situation was about to change. The Ottoman forces in Montenegro under the command of Süleyman Pasha received orders to transfer to Eastern Rumelia on 3 July. These forces were transported by sea from the Adriatic coast and arrived in Alexandroupolis on 21 July. Süleyman Pasha proceeded to Nova Zagora via Edirne without wasting any time. He took the forces in Sliven and Nova Zagora under his command and formed the Balkan corps (42 battalions and 2 cavalry squadrons) and advanced to the Stara Zagora on 29 July.⁴⁶ His plan was to push the Russians to the north of the Balkan passes, and then to force them to withdraw to the Danube in coordinated attacks with the Danube Eastern Army. Süleyman Pasha recaptured the Stara Zagora on July 31 and the Nova Zagora on August 3 and drove the Gurko forces to the Hainköy Pass. The Russian advance in the south of the Balkans was halted.⁴⁷

Mehmet Ali Pasha, who was appointed as the General Commander of the Danube Armies, arrived in Shumen on 21 July. He decided to gather the scattered forces in the Danube Eastern Army and form a strong attack group. By the end of July, a force of 58 infantry battalions, 38 cavalry squadrons and 96 guns had gathered in Razgrad. However, he did not find this force sufficient to take the offensive and requested reinforcements from Istanbul to gather a force of about 100 battalions.⁴⁸ It was a big mistake that Mehmet Ali Pasha did not attack quickly. After the defeat in Pleven, the Russians had the opportunity to recover and bring reinforcements from Russia.⁴⁹

By the beginning of August, the Ottoman army had gained some advantages. The Russian advance was stopped in Pleven and a large enemy force was engaged there. The Russians were driven from the south of the Balkan Mountains and a strong Ottoman force deployed

⁴⁶ Süleyman Hüsnü Paşa, *Umdetü'l Hakâyık*, V.2, Askeri Mecmua, 11, (1928), p. 5.

⁴⁷ Nikolay Epanchin, *op. cit.*, p. 257-277; Ahmed Saib, *op. cit.*, p. 169-178.

⁴⁸ Süer, *op. cit.*, p. 206-207.

⁴⁹ At the end of August, Istanbul estimated that the Russian force in the Balkans was 248.000 men, of which 150.000 were combatants and the rest were non-combatant personnel. BOA, Y.PRK.ASK. 1/40.

against Shipka. Besides, the Danube Eastern Army gathered in the Razgrad-Omurtag region with its main force. If these groups could attack in coordination, the Russian army could be driven to the Danube. But that would not be possible. The forces in Razgrad, Shipka and Pleven could not act in coordination to support each other. Because there was a serious discord among the Ottoman commanders at the front. Mehmet Ali Pasha, who was appointed as the General Commander of the Danube Armies, had just risen to the rank of Müşir. Süleyman and Osman Pasha were his seniors. This caused a reaction. The forces in Shipka and Pleven acted as if they were independent. The attitude of Istanbul made the situation even more complicated. There was mutual distrust and rivalry between Mehmet Ali Pasha and Süleyman Pasha. In fact, Mehmet Ali Pasha was acting more like the Eastern Army commander rather than Front Commander. The Sultan, bypassing the Front Commander, was directly communicating with Süleyman and Osman Pashas and giving orders.⁵⁰ Under these conditions, it was not possible to establish a unity of command.

Süleyman Pasha captured Nova Zagora on 3 August and the Russians withdrew to the Balkan passes. He was planning to attack the Shipka pass. At the same time, the Danube Western Army would attack from the east and the Danube Eastern Army from the west. Thus, the enemy would be stuck between the three armies.⁵¹ However, Mehmet Ali Pasha did not agree. He wanted Süleyman Pasha to come to the north of the Balkans via Elena and Omurtag with his main force and join the Danube Eastern Army.⁵² He was thinking of forcing the Russians to withdraw with the attack of his own forces from the east and the Danube Western Army from the west. Thus, the Ottoman forces would not have to attack a fortified position like Shipka. However, Süleyman Pasha was reluctant to go to the north of the Balkans with his forces and to enter the command of Mehmet Ali

⁵⁰ For the correspondence between Süleyman Pasha, Mehmet Ali Pasha and Istanbul, see. Süleyman Hüsnü Paşa, *Umdetü'l Hakâyık*, V.3, Erkan-ı Hârbiye-i Umumiye Onuncu Şubesi, 1928, p. 1-171; Süer, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

⁵¹ Süleyman Hüsnü Paşa, *Umdetü'l Hakâyık*, V.2, s. 28-29; *Rumeli Orduları Başkumandanı Süleyman Hüsnü Paşa'nın 93 Osmanlı-Rus Harbi Hatıraları*, Çelik Yayınevi, İstanbul 2021, p. 57.

⁵² Süleyman Hüsnü Paşa, *Umdetü'l Hakâyık*, V.2, p. 114.

Pasha. He wanted a victory on his own. Both sides were complaining about each other to Istanbul, but neither the Sultan nor the Military Council could solve the crisis at the front. As a result, the two commanders did not agree on a coordinated attack that would support each other. Thus, the Russians had the opportunity to bring reinforcements from Tırnovo at the most critical moments of the Battle of Shipka.⁵³

Süleyman Pasha, who decided to attack Shipka, had to move quickly before the Russians could make defense preparations. However, he lost time with the preparations for the attack, and the Shipka attack could only begin on August 21. In this way, the Russians had the opportunity to bring reinforcements and strengthen the defense. The Ottoman force deployed against Shipka was 28.000 men. However, the attack that continued for six days against the fortified positions in a narrow strait was not successful. Ottoman casualties were about 7000 men. Süleyman Pasha realized that he could not seize the pass with his strength and stopped the attack. He attacked Shipka once again on September 16. However, he was defeated again and had to withdraw.⁵⁴

Mehmet Ali Pasha played an important role in the loss of the Battle of Shipka by not taking action. The force gathered in Razgrad had reached 67 battalions, 44 cavalry squadrons and 22 batteries by the end of August.⁵⁵ But Mehmet Ali Pasha could not dare to attack due to the false intelligence he received about the enemy. He carried out some limited targeted attacks with the warning of Istanbul, but did not dare to a decisive battle. These attacks were made without a center of gravity and were not well commanded. The Russians withdrew from

⁵³ Mehmed Hulusi, *op. cit.*, p. 146, 158-162; Erkan-ı Harbiye Kolağalarından Reşid, *op. cit.*, p. 51-52.

⁵⁴ Barnwell, *op. cit.*, p. 510-521; Greene, *op. cit.*, p. 209-215.

⁵⁵ In a report submitted to the Sultan on September 10, the state of force was shown as follows. Danube East Army; 39 battalions in Ruse, 30 battalions in Silistra, 48 battalions in Shumen, 11 battalions in Varna and 15 battalions in Dobrici. Danube Western Army; 20 battalions in Vidin, Lom and Rahova, 52 in Pleven, 32 in Sofia, Berkovitsa and Orhanie. BOA, Y. PRK. ASK, 1/42.

the Lom line and established a new line of defense just behind it.⁵⁶ The pressure from Istanbul was increasing day by day. Finally, Mehmet Ali Pasha planned a massive attack at the beginning of October, but could not find the opportunity to implement it. The Sultan dismissed Mehmet Ali Pasha on October 2 and appointed Süleyman Pasha as the Commander of the Danube Army.⁵⁷

From the Third Battle of Pleven to the End of the War

After surviving the Ottoman offensives in August, the Russians turned their attention back to Pleven. Capturing this critical city would unlock the war. Meanwhile, Osman Pasha made a great effort to improve the defense of the city. He was also trying to disrupt the Russians by making limited attacks on critical areas around Pleven. However, the Russian force against him was growing more and more. With reinforcements from Russia and the participation of the Romanian army, the forces around Pleven had increased to four corps (74.000 infantry, 10.000 cavalry and 442 cannons). The Russians also brought heavy siege artillery.⁵⁸ The Ottoman force was approximately 40 thousand, including 35.000 infantry, 3000 cavalry, 1000 artillery and 80 cannons.⁵⁹

The first step of the Pleven operation would be the capture of Lovech. The force defending the city consisted of 8 infantry battalions and 6 cannons. The Russian force prepared for the attack on the city consisted of 25 battalions, 4 regiments of cavalry and 30 cannons. The Russians attacked on 1 September. Although the Ottoman forces suffered great losses, they lasted until September 3. Only two battalions were able to withdraw to Pleven. Osman Pasha, who learned that Lovech was in danger, took action with 22 battalions on 3

⁵⁶ Süleyman Hüsnü Paşa, *Umdetü'l Hakâyık*, V.3, s. 3-4; Maurice, *op. cit.*, p. 152-159; Süer, *op. cit.*, p. 311.

⁵⁷ Ahmed Midhat Efendi, *op. cit.*, p. 256-262; Keçecizade İzzet Fuat, *op. cit.*, p. 46-48.

⁵⁸ Greene, *op. cit.*, p. 234; According to H. Süer, the Russian force against Pleven was 96.000 infantry, 20.000 cavalry and 458 cannons. Süer, *op. cit.*, p. 360.

⁵⁹ Albay Talat, *op. cit.*, p. 45; According to William von Herbert, the force in the city was 30.000 men and 72 cannons. William von Herbert, *The Defence of Plevna 1877*, Smith, Elder&Co., London 1911, p. 181.

September to help. However, when he approached the city, he saw that he was late and he return to Pleven.⁶⁰

The Third Battle of Pleven began with Russian bombardment on 7 September. While the Russian artillery heavily fired the fortifications around the city, the offensive forces were positioned for the attack. The defenders were trying to respond despite the insufficient number of guns and ammunition. In addition, Ottoman forces were making limited attacks against Russian positions. The fortifications destroyed by artillery fire were being repaired at nights. After four days of bombardment, on September 11, the Russian-Romanian army attacked. The Russians attacked in three groups. But these groups could not act in coordination. In this way, Osman Pasha could move troops to critical points within the defense lines. Due to the determined defense of the Ottoman forces, the Russians suffered great losses. They managed to seize some fortifications around the city. However, Osman Pasha took back most of these bastions with counterattacks. By the evening of September 12, the Russian casualties had exceeded 20.000 men. Ottoman casualties were about 4000 men. While the Russo-Romanian forces were withdrawing in panic, the Ottomans were unable to carry out a pursuit operation once again.⁶¹

After being defeated for the third time in Pleven, the Russians gave up the offensive. In this case, two courses of action are possible. The first was to leave a sufficient force in front of Pleven and march on Edirne with the rest of the army. However, the Tsar did not approve of this plan. It was very dangerous to advance to the south of the Balkans without capturing Pleven. As a result, it was decided to besiege the city and cut off its contact with the outside. In order to besiege Pleven, reinforcements had to come from Russia. A large cavalry force was sent to the Pleven-Sofia road to isolate the city. However, the Russian

⁶⁰ Herbert, *op. cit.*, p. 178-181.

⁶¹ In different sources, different numbers are given for the casualties of the Russian-Romanian army between 18.000-25.000 and for the Ottoman casualties between 3000-5000 men. Charles S. Ryan- John Sandes, *Under The Red Crescent*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1897, p. 225-238; Francis Stanley, *St.Petersburg to Plevna*, Richard Bentley and Son, London 1878, p. 187-203; Herbert, *op. cit.*, p. 221-223; İbrahim Edhem, *op. cit.*, p. 52-57.

cavalry could not prevent the Ottomans from bringing supplies to Pleven via Orhanie. The last Ottoman reinforcements arrived in the city on 8 October. But the Russian force around Pleven continued to increase. General Gurko captured Radomirski on 28 October and forced the Ottoman forces to withdraw to Orhanie. The siege was completed when the Russians captured the Orhanie-Pleven road.⁶²

Osman Pasha has been criticized for not leaving Pleven when he had the opportunity. Actually, Osman Pasha knew that he would be besieged and he wanted to withdraw from Pleven at the beginning of October. He would retreat to Orhanie and be positioned there, preventing the Russians from advancing to the south of the Balkans. In case of staying in Pleven, the Orhanie-Pleven supply route had to be kept open. However, Istanbul did not accept the withdrawal and failed to keep the Orhanie-Pleven road open.⁶³ The war council gave permission to withdraw from Pleven at the end of October, but it was too late.⁶⁴

The Russian army was stuck around Pleven. The pause in the Russian operation was an important opportunity for the Ottomans. But this opportunity would be wasted. Mehmet Ali Pasha had planned a general offensive at the beginning of October. But Suleyman Pasha, who was appointed as the Commander-in-Chief of the Danube Army on October 2, did not consider the preparations for the attack sufficient. He began preparations for the offensive again. By mid-October the strength of the Danube Eastern Army had reached 118.000 men (71.800 in the field army and 46.400 in the forts). However, Istanbul saw an offensive move as very dangerous and wanted to wait for the enemy's move.⁶⁵ The orders sent from Istanbul to the front were uncertain and inconsisted. These left Süleyman Pasha in indecision.

⁶² Alexander Jacob Schem, *War In The East: An Illustrated History of the Conflict Between Russia*, H.S.Goodspeed & Co., New York 1878, p. 323-326; Maurice, *op. cit.*, p. 247-257; Barnwell, *op. cit.*, p. 573-574.

⁶³ Mahmud Celaledin Paşa, *op. cit.*, p. 470-471; Ahmed Midhat Efendi, *op. cit.*, p. 272-277; Süer, *op. cit.*, p. 454.

⁶⁴ BOA, Y.EE, 76/26.

⁶⁵ Süer, *op. cit.*, p. 418-421.

Rescuing the forces in Pleven was possible only with a coordinated attack of the Danube Eastern Army, the Balkan Corps and the forces in Sofia. However, Süleyman Pasha could not get support from the commanders at the front. The incompatibility between the Ottoman commanders prevented cooperation. Rauf Pasha, who was brought to the Balkan Command after Süleyman Pasha, was hostile to him. Rauf Pasha complained about Süleyman Pasha to Istanbul and said that he did not want to work under his command. Rauf Pasha achieved his goal at the end of November and was appointed as the commander of the reserve army. Shortly after, he became the Chief of the General Staff. After Rauf Pasha, Ahmet Eyüp Pasha was appointed as the Balkan Commander. However, in a short time, conflict arose between Ahmet Eyüp Pasha and Süleyman Pasha. Ahmet Eyüp Pasha was dismissed on 20 December and replaced by Veysel Pasha. On the other hand, Mehmet Ali Pasha, who was dismissed from the front command, was appointed to the command of the forces in Sofia. Like Rauf Pasha, Mehmet Ali Pasha did not cooperate with Süleyman Pasha. Mehmet Ali Pasha planned an operation from Orhanie to open the way to Pleven. However, he was not successful and was replaced by Şakir Pasha. It was a big mistake that these three commanders, who could not work together, were assigned to the Balkan front at the same time. Istanbul did nothing to correct this mistake.⁶⁶

The Ottoman headquarters spent October in indecision. According to Suleyman Pasha, the Russian plan was to march to Sofia via Pleven and from there to the south of the Balkans and advance to Edirne. In order to prevent the Russians, the Orhaniye region had to be defended strongly and the forces in Pleven had to be saved. For this purpose, Süleyman Pasha planned a coordinated operation. He would lead a force of 40 battalions to be taken from the Danube Eastern Army and the Balkan corps, and he would personally advance to Radomirtsi. At the same time, Osman Pasha would break the siege and unite with Süleman Pasha force in Radomirtsi. However, Istanbul did not accept

⁶⁶ Uyar-Erickson, *op. cit.*, p. 191-192; Ahmed Saib, *op. cit.*, p. 282-287.

this and demanded a new plan.⁶⁷ As the Ottomans wasted valuable time, the siege in Pleven was approaching to the end.

By mid-November, the Ottoman and Russian armies were holding their current positions. Süleyman Pasha was planning to move his headquarters to Edirne in order to communicate easily with the forces in Shipka and Sofia. This plan worried the Sultan a lot. Because the Sultan had severe suspicions against Süleyman Pasha because of his role in the dethronement of Sultan Abdülaziz. As a result, he did not allow Süleyman Pasha to leave Razgrad.⁶⁸ In this situation, Süleyman Pasha decided to take action with the Danube Eastern Army. He would attack Elena to attract the attention of the Russians and would allow Osman Pasha to withdraw from Pleven. Süleyman Pasha captured Elena on 4 December. The road to Tirnovo was opened. But Mehmet Ali Pasha in Sofia did not act on Pleven. The Balkan corps also did not support this offensive. Under these conditions, Süleyman Pasha could not continue the offensive towards Tirnovo.⁶⁹ Once again, an important opportunity was missed because of the disagreement between the commanders at the front.

By the end of November, Pleven had no hope of salvation. General Gurko captured Orhanie on 28 November and forced Mehmet Ali Pasha to withdraw. The Russo-Romanian force around the city had totaled 160.000 men, including 191 battalions, 120 cavalry squadrons and 650 cannons. The Ottoman force was about 40.000 men, including 30.000 combatants. There were not enough supplies and ammunition stored in the city. By December supplies had run out. Nearly 4000 soldiers had died in the last six weeks, most of them from disease.⁷⁰ Osman Pasha had planned to break the siege with a sudden attack and withdraw to Sofia rather than surrender. The Ottoman forces leaving Pleven on 10 December. They were able to break through the first siege line, but could not advance any further. The Ottoman army lost

⁶⁷ Süleyman Hüsnü Paşa, *Umdetü'l Hakâyık*, V.4, Erkan-ı Hârbiye-i Umumiye Onuncu Şubesi, 1928, p. 1.

⁶⁸ *Rumeli Orduları Başkumandanı Süleyman Hüsnü Paşa'nın 93 Osmanlı-Rus Harbi Hatıraları*, s. 64-65; Süer, *op. cit.*, p. 431-432.

⁶⁹ Süleyman Hüsnü Paşa, *Umdetü'l Hakâyık*, V.4, p. 19-20.

⁷⁰ Greene, *op. cit.*, p. 290-298; Herbert, *op. cit.*, p. 306

about 6000 casualties in the battle. After Osman Pasha was injured, the Pleven army had to surrender.⁷¹ Osman Pasha was personally visited by Grand Duke Nichola and Romanian Prince Charles and congratulated for his heroic defense.⁷²

The fall of Pleven changed the course of the war, and the Russian forces, gathered around the city for siege, was released. The Russian force gathered at the front had exceeded 300.000 men. In addition, Serbia declared its independence on December 16 and declared war on the Ottoman Empire. Some of the Ottoman forces in Sofia had to engage in the Serbian operation. Two ideas were put forward at the Russian headquarters for the next phase of the operation. According to some commanders, it was very dangerous to advance to the south of the Balkans under winter conditions and the Ruse fortress had to be captured first. Grand Duke Nichola, on the other hand, wanted to move quickly to the south of the Balkans via Sofia and march on Edirne. Finally, the second opinion prevailed.⁷³ The Ottoman plan, on the other hand, was to stop the Russian army at the Balkan passes and prevent its advance to the south of the Balkans. According to Istanbul, if the Russian army could be stopped for a while, diplomacy would come into play and the war would come to an end. For this purpose, Istanbul requested that a force of 60 battalions be shifted from the Danube Eastern Army to the south of the Balkan Mountains.⁷⁴

The Russians took action on December 28. General Gurko (65.000 infantry, 6000 cavalry and 280 guns) advanced from Orhanie and captured Sofia on January 3, 1878.⁷⁵ Ottoman forces withdrew to Pazardzhik and started to establish a new defense line. Süleyman Pasha was planning to collect his forces in Edirne and establish a new line of defense. Edirne was in the middle of the front and the center of the telegraph lines. He wanted to move his headquarters to Edirne. But the Sultan, who was worried that Süleyman Pasha would be so

⁷¹ Albay Talat, *op. cit.*, p. 111-118; İbrahim Edhem, *op. cit.*, p. 67-73; Henry Hozier, *op. cit.*, p. 715-725.

⁷² Stanley, *op. cit.*, p. 239-241.

⁷³ Greene, *op. cit.*, p. 323-324

⁷⁴ Süleyman Hüsnü Paşa, *Umdetü'l Hakâyik*, V.4, p. 220-221; Ahmed Saib, *op. cit.*, p. 305-306; Menning, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

⁷⁵ Maurice, *op. cit.*, p. 292-293.

close to the capital, did not allow it. Istanbul forced Süleyman Pasha to go to the defense line in Pazardzhik. Süleyman Pasha, who came to Panagüriste, was ten hours away from the nearest telegraph center. While he was at the headquarters in Panagüriste, it was not possible for him to learn the developments in time and give orders quickly. The Front Commander was paralyzed.⁷⁶

While the Ottoman army was trying to establish a defensive line in Pazardzhik, the Russians attacked Shipka. General Radetzky's forces (56.000 infantry, 2000 cavalry and 252 guns) were divided into three groups. While the central group attacked directly, the other two groups advanced from the east and west of the pass to encircle the Ottoman troops. The Russian operation was successful and the Ottoman troops at Shipka surrendered on January 9.⁷⁷ The situation was very critical for the Ottoman army. The Russians could march from Shipka to Edirne and surround the Ottoman forces in Pazardzhik from behind. Under these conditions, all Ottoman forces had to be withdrawn to Edirne quickly and a new defense line had to be established. The Ottoman army could gain time by defending in Edirne and the Russians could be persuaded to an armistice during this time. But Istanbul made a big mistake. The Ottoman government decided to ask for an armistice on 8 January. In this context, all troops were ordered to keep their positions and not to withdraw. Istanbul was acting as if an armistice had been signed. However, the Russians did not respond to the armistice offer and continued to advance. All troops had to be withdrawn to Edirne quickly, but Istanbul prevented this. Süleyman Pasha lost two days to get approval from Istanbul to withdraw to Edirne.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Süleyman Hüsnü Paşa, *Umdetü'l Hakâyık*, V.2, p. 161-162; *Rumeli Orduları Başkumandanı Süleyman Hüsnü Paşa'nın 93 Osmanlı-Rus Harbi Hatıraları*, p. 75-78.

⁷⁷ Richard Graf von Pfeil, *Experiences of a Prussian Officer in the Russian Service During the Turkish War of 1877-1878*, Edward Stanford, London 1893, p. 184-204; Alexander Statiev, "A Hitch on the Path to Glory: The Breakthrough Across the Balkan Ridge During the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78", *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 32/4, (2019) p. 519-522 ; Hozier, *op. cit.*, p. 798-803.

⁷⁸ Süleyman Hüsnü Paşa, *Umdetü'l Hakâyık*, V.4, p. 350; *Rumeli Orduları Başkumandanı Süleyman Hüsnü Paşa'nın 93 Osmanlı-Rus Harbi Hatıraları*, p. 79-82.

The Russians took advantage of this opportunity and from the north they advanced to the withdrawal route of the forces in Pazardzhik. General Gurko, on the other hand, was pushing the Ottoman forces by advancing from the west. Süleyman Pasha could not hold on to Plovdiv. His retreat path was also cut off. Stuck between two Russian forces, Suleyman Pasa panicked and headed for the Rhodope Mountains. The Ottoman forces passed through the passes in the mountains and reached Komotini and Xanthi in a devastated state.⁷⁹ Suleyman Pasha was planning to gather his forces again and transport them to Alexandroupoli by sea and reach Edirne. However, he wouldn't have enough time for that.

The Russians captured Plovdiv on January 17. Edirne road was completely opened. The weak Ottoman force gathered in the city withdrew on 19 January. The Russians entered Edirne on 20 January without any resistance. Meanwhile, Ahmet Muhtar Pasha, who was called from the Caucasus Front, was trying to establish a defense line in Çatalca. But it was a hopeless effort. Only 25.000 men were able to gather in Çatalca in a miserable condition. Russian forces reached Çatalca on 29 January. The Sultan saw that the situation was hopeless and applied to the Tsar on 13 January to request an armistice. Armistice talks started on 20 January and were signed on 31 October in Edirne. The Russian army entered Çatalca on 6 February. Grand Duke Nichola established his headquarters in San Stefano the next day.⁸⁰ The war was over.

Conclusion

The war of 1877-1878 was a tough exam for the Ottoman army. But he failed in this exam. There were many reasons for the defeat. In particular, mistakes made in strategic command were decisive in the defeat. While the Ottoman campaign was being planned, the course of action that the Russians would follow could not be predicted correctly. Ottoman decision makers had acted with wrong predictions. The Ottomans thought that the Russians would not go to the south of the

⁷⁹ Erkan-ı Harbiye Kolağalarından Reşid, *op. cit.*, p. 60-61; Keçecizade İzzet Fuat, *op. cit.*, p. 112-114; Greene, *op. cit.*, p. 338-347.

⁸⁰ Gazi Ahmed Muhtar Paşa, *op. cit.*, p. 284-289; Mehmed Hulusi, *op. cit.*, p. 204-208.

Balkans without capturing the Danube fortresses as in the previous wars, but they were wrong. Therefore, an incorrect deployment was made. The Danube River and the Balkan Mountains, which were the main defense lines, were not defended with sufficient forces. As a matter of fact, the Russian army was able to cross the Danube easily and captured the Balkan passes in a very short time. The Ottoman forces, which were deployed very dispersedly, could not react by gathering on time.

The Ottoman army entered the war with a wrong plan and improper deployment. However, bigger mistakes were made in the command of the war. Three generals commanded the Ottoman forces in the Balkans throughout the war. Of these, only Abdülkerim Pasha had authority over the army commanders. However, he could not take the necessary measures against the rapidly developing Russian operation and was dismissed in a short time. Mehmet Ali Pasha and Süleyman Pasha never had the opportunity to act as front commanders. Incompatibility and personal struggles between frontline commanders paralyzed the command system. This situation worsened with the interventions of Istanbul on the front. The Sultan's desire to conduct the war from Istanbul, destroyed the unity of command. The repeated interventions of both the Sultan and the military council destroyed the weak authority of the front commanders. Under these conditions, it was not possible for the Ottoman forces gathered in Shumen, Shipka and Pleven to carry out a coordinated operation. The Ottoman forces, which could not act together against the enemy, were defeated piece by piece. On the other hand, the Russian army was commanded from one hand throughout the war and the Tsar did not leave the army.

The only significant success of the Ottoman army on the Balkan Front was the defense of Pleven, which lasted for five months. Ottoman soldiers proved to the whole world, how well they could fight under the command of a competent and determined commander like Osman Pasha. However, the advantage gained through the defense of Pleven could not be used properly. With the defeat at the end of the war, the Ottoman rule in the Balkans was largely eliminated. The great migration from the Balkans to Anatolia due to the war had important

political and social consequences. With the war of 1877-1878, another step was taken on the way to the end of the Ottoman Empire.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Balkan Front Operations in the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-1878

