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ATROCITIES IN THE BALKAN WARS

(BALKAN SAVAŞLARI'NDAKİ MEZALİMLER)

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Hungarian Turcologist and ethnographer Dr. Gyula Mészáros' booklet published in Hungarian titled *A Balkáni Háború Kegyetlenségei (Eredeti Török Források Alapján)* [Atrocities In The Balkan Wars, According to Original Turkish Sources] has been translated to English by Dr. Vural Yıldırım and prepared for Turkish publication by Prof. Dr. Melek Çolak. The Turkish translation also provides the original Hungarian text at the end of the Turkish text. Various information is presented regarding the events and mindset of the "Balkan tragedy" and the methods used by the Bulgarians, Greeks, Serbians, and Montenegrins with the aim of annihilating or expelling the Muslim-Turkish population from Macedonia and Rumelia. Bandit

gangs, revolutionary committees, soldiers and deserters, and fractions of the local non-Muslim communities that had resided together peacefully in the past were among those who committed the atrocities against the Muslim-Turkish population. Concerning these events, information is presented from various sources including witness statements, the official 9 December 1912 dated report of the Thessaloniki Governor, the letter of the Rojden regional official, and the report of the British Consul.

It is stated that the atrocities committed against the Muslim-Turkish population were not rooted in animosity, disputes between people, ideals or historical memories that evoked revenge. It was in fact economic issues that served as the catalyst of the atrocities in the Balkans (p. 31). Similarly, the desire for land was a motivating factor for the crimes perpetrated, for example, by Bulgarian villagers. People who were previously good neighbours and friends to each other unfortunately resorted to violence with the winds of war. The booklet lists various forms of aggression perpetrated towards the Muslim-Turkish population: massacres, torture, searching for and targeting girls and women from minaret balconies with binoculars, rape and forceful weddings, chasing after people who had been able to escape the attacks or who were previously released, tying lifeless bodies to donkeys and having them dragged, the destruction of mosques or their conversion into churches, seizure of schools, theft of all valuable and non-valuable belongings, gathering of the victims' weapons in order to deprive them of the means of defense, forcing victims to carry out menial work in order to humiliate them, making victims dig and bury graves, and cutting off postal communication. In fact, there was such frenzy while carrying these atrocities that the Filippopoli Young British Consul report indicates that a dispute occurred between the committee members and the Serbian soldiers in Tikveş due to how a pillaging would be carried out and that a Serbian soldier was killed because of this disagreement. In the open letter written by a lawyer from Manastır (Bitola) to the British Foreign Minister Sir Edward Grey, the explanation "Among these ill-fated victims, a woman's corpse, whose clothes were completely removed, was attention-grabbing; this woman was holding her six-month-old baby – both of them had many bayonet marks. She had stretched out her frozen right arm towards the train, as if she was begging..." (p. 55) is among the spine-chilling examples in the book.

One of the striking subjects in the booklet is about the long term aims behind the atrocities in the Balkan Wars, the discourses used and the

unresponsiveness and widescale prejudice it created in the European public opinion. It is stated that the committee activities formed in the Balkans against the Muslim-Turkish population had begun long before the Balkan Wars and that countless people in many countries were waiting for the day to strike. It is known that the bandit gangs and committees, which were trained and fed by the resources of the Bulgarian state and foreign money, were already perpetrating atrocities in Macedonia and Thrace according to a systematic plan for years.

It is expressed that the intention was to continuously draw Europe's attention to Macedonia and to create an excuse to "save their Bulgarian kin" through the claim that there was an ongoing intercommunal conflict between the Christian and Muslim constituents here (pp. 24-25). Due to the European public opinion's ignorance and prejudice regarding the Turks, it was not difficult to blame the Turks for the crimes and ongoing communal problems. Moreover, it was indicated that in the official 9 December 1912 dated report of the Thessaloniki Governor that the Bulgarian gangs had been continuously conducting a policy of ethnicity-based massacre in the past and during that period against the Muslim population in Macedonia and that the Bulgarian state was turning a blind eye to the crimes being committed (p. 39). Likewise, it was expressed that the Bulgarian land occupation policy in the 20th century involved slaughtering the Turkish villager population and freely settling into their lands (p. 41). Through utilizing slogans, excuses, and false news created by the forces oppressing the Muslim-Turkish population, it was aimed to fabricate a religious justification for their inhumane and illegal activities. With this intent, the slogans of the "crusade" and "saving kin" were created. Additionally, they attempted to cover up their own crimes with the accusation that there had been an ongoing oppression perpetrated by the Turks.

An often re-occurring theme will catch the reader's attention when reading on the atrocities committed against the Turkish-Muslim population; the perpetrators of the atrocities attempted to justify their actions by using excuses, no matter how unbelievable their justifications were. For instance, attacking people who took refuge in mosques and who were waving white flags was justified on the grounds that "shots were fired from the mosque". Raiding peoples' homes was justified with the need to "search for weapons". Under the "blood courts" formed by the bandit criminals, people were arbitrarily arrested and executed.

A particularly striking example is the trap a few Bulgarians set up for a Serbian private in the city of Kavadar after the Serbian occupation and its aftermath. The Bulgarians told a Serbian private where he could find hay to feed his horse. While the Serbian soldier was searching for hay in the stated location, the Bulgarians killed the Serbian using an axe and pistol. Subsequently, they ran to the streets and began yelling “Muslims are killing soldiers”. After the Serbian commander was informed of the Bulgarian version of the incident, he gave the order to kill the Muslims. This gory event was presented as an example confirming how the Muslims were slaughtered according to a complex plan (p. 52).

Furthermore, explanations and remarks were made regarding the oppressors’ tendencies of atrociousness together with their fixation on land, money and property. There were graves that had been vandalized “...for the pleasure of the evil monsters who turned into animals because they were weak...” (p. 19). “Feral feelings which were hidden behind a mask of religion and vile civilization” was an expression made denouncing Europe for the uncivilized slaughtering of Turks in the name of false slogans (p. 19). “The begging of a wife, the scream of a mother and the weeping of a child never affected their souls, they were thirsty for blood...” is stated addressing the criminals who were committing horrific murders while unabashedly claiming that they were being oppressed (p. 27). The description “These sub-human creatures must have been thirsting for blood so much...” was used for the criminals who decided to impale their lifeless victims (p. 46). The Bulgarian in the Bahola village close to Tikveş who turned from a neighbour into an enemy yells “You will die Turkish dog!...”, the Bulgarians yell to the Turkish women and children “You will either become Bulgarians or be like your men” (p. 51). The Bulgarians in Dedeğaç say “Ferdinand has forgiven you, shout with us: Hurra!” to the Turks who were able to escape and hide (p. 35). It is indicated that in a village in Gümölcine, where the Turkish and Bulgarian population were living in friendship, the Turkish authorities had protected the Bulgarians against Serbian and Greek gangs numbers of times. However, in return for this, despite that the Bulgarians of Kalaycı promised their Turkish neighbours during the occupation that they would safeguard them, eventually they came to an agreement with the revolutionary committees and together they burned the Muslim village, massacred the men and raped the women (p. 63).

The booklet offers some critical explanations towards the Balkan and the European and Christian geography regarding the atrocities. The “Balkan consciousness” was described as having a “burning desire” with

regards to creating slogans for fabricating justification for their crimes against the Turks (p. 23). The perpetrators who chose to have their dead victims dragged by donkeys were expressed as a case of the “Balkan spirit” not being “appeased” by the taking of lives (p. 44). The booklet holds the supposedly civilized Europe as being responsible for the “bloody carnival” that took place in the Balkans due to its silent consent. It is explained that the police would not pursue the perpetrators of the atrocities and that the perpetrators would even receive a badge of heroism once the war ended. Events of bandits freely reaching the cities, a governor preventing the horrified citizens from escaping, citizens who were able to escape the massacres being told to return to their homes that have been robbed and burned were also among the occurrences.

Together with the numerous negative cases, some positive instances are also included in the booklet. For example, a foreign consul reacted to the report of the massacres in Thessaloniki by saying “I am ashamed of myself for being a Christian and for being a European!” (p. 40). In addition, different examples were given about the attitude of religious functionaries. In one example, the Bulgarian and Greek churches were waving white flags during the massacres and some city residents asked for the committee leaders to end the killings, but their request was futile. On the other hand, in the negative examples, a gang in the Buf village entered a house under the leadership of a Pope Nikola and a Cretan Greek Orthodox church priest Alko in Midilli (Lesbos Island) shot two men.

This booklet, while catching the interest of the reader, also elicits feelings of sadness, disgust, and anger due to the details of the atrocities it narrates. In this regard, the author’s question of “Which scourged aspirations, what kind of a repressed and sudden vast societal irateness was needed to succeed in turning a person into such a monster!?” (p. 14) regarding the atrocities is particularly poignant.