

Chapter 1

A Swift Kick: Russian Diplomatic Practice in Bulgaria, 1879–1883

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the unusually swift downturn in Russo-Bulgarian relations between 1879 and 1883. In 1879, relations between the two countries were unusually good, founded on a basis of mutual sympathy, geopolitical necessity, and strong administrative ties. By 1883, however, a series of lapses in Russian diplomatic practice damaged Russo-Bulgarian relations to the point that all of Bulgaria's political elite was united in opposition to the Russians, and by 1886 diplomatic relations were severed altogether. This chapter examines three incidents in particular – the Titles Controversy of late 1879/early 1880, the Coup of 1881, and the tenure of Generals L. N. Sobolev and A. V. Kaul'bars in 1882-1883. Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates how flawed diplomatic practice may result in undesirable foreign policy outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Bulgaria has long been on the borderlands of the East-West international order, and one of the first stops for Russian influence in Europe. Bulgaria was a member of the Soviet-led Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance (WARSAW) Pact which lasted from May 14, 1955–July 1, 1991, one of the key instruments of Soviet power (Crump, 2015). On March 29, 2004, however, Bulgaria became a part of NATO (Angelov, 2007), and on January 1, 2007, Bulgaria, along with Romania,

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gained full membership in the EU. This would not be the first time that Bulgaria was pushed away from their eastern neighbors.

In early September of 1885, Prince Alexander von Battenberg, the German-born Prince (Kn̄az) of Bulgaria, complained to a pair of Russian agents that there was no educated person in Bulgaria who had not been initially charmed by Russia, only to later receive “*des coups de pied dans le derrier*,” or a kick in the rear (L’vov, 1886, pp. 100-101). This might be considered an odd comment for the Prince of Bulgaria to make. After all, not quite a decade earlier, the Russian Empire had gone to war against the Ottoman Turks for the liberation of Bulgaria. It was to the Russian Empire that Bulgaria owed its independence. The Russian Tsar Alexander II was hailed as the *Tsar-Liberator*, with statues and boulevards named in his honor in the Bulgarian capital of Sofia. Battenberg himself was a minor German princeling elevated to the Bulgarian throne based on the strength of his close connections to the Russian Imperial Family; his aunt was the Empress Maria Alexandrovna, wife of Tsar Alexander II, born Marie of Hesse and by Rhine (Jelavich, 1958). In truth, by 1885, there was not a soul in Europe who would have been shocked by Battenberg’s statements. Over the course of seven years, from 1879 to 1886, a series of Russian diplomatic and military agents had managed to dismantle Russia’s relationship with Bulgaria.

Initial relations between the two countries were excellent. In 1878, twenty-three thousand Bulgarians signed a petition of thanksgiving addressed to Alexander II (Crampton, 2007). The Prince of Bulgaria was also the nephew of the Russian Tsar, and the Bulgarian Minister of War and the entire Bulgarian officer corps were Russian officers on detached duty from the Imperial Army (Crampton, 2007). Finally, Bulgaria relied upon Russian support to avoid being reconquered by the Ottoman Turks. There were therefore substantial emotional, administrative, and geopolitical reasons for relations between the two countries to be very strong.

Still, by 1886, relations had deteriorated to such a degree that St. Petersburg backed a coup against Battenberg. Russia considered occupying the country, and when that was deemed impractical, she chose to sever diplomatic relations—a state of affairs that lasted until 1894. The primary cause of this turn of events was the behavior of Russian military and diplomatic agents in Bulgaria, who managed to behave so obnoxiously that, in the words of the British Ambassador, they managed “to make the rival parties among the Bulgarians forget their animosities for the moment and united them against the [Russians]” (Victoria, 1926, pp. 444-445). The disintegration of Russo-Bulgarian relations occurred with a shocking swiftness, and it was a stunning defeat for Russian ambitions in the Balkans.

This chapter discusses three incidents to demonstrate how precisely the Russian agents in Bulgaria managed to severely damage Russo-Bulgarian relations. It is argued that lapses in diplomatic practices on behalf of the Russian Empire allowed them to cause such damage. The first event examined is the struggle between Prince

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