Immediate Effects of the 1877-1878 Russo-Ottoman War on the Muslims of Bulgaria

Pinar Üre

The political and diplomatic consequences of the 1877-8 Russo-Turkish War had significant effects on both the domestic politics of Russian and Ottoman Empires and on European diplomacy. Leaving its political outcomes aside, the war had a considerable impact on the civilian population of Balkan Peninsula. While the 1877-1878 War had been widely studied through a diplomatic angle, more work is needed to shed light on its social repercussions. In the scope of this paper, the immediate effects of the 1877-8 Russo-Turkish War on the civilian Muslim population of Bulgaria will be briefly portrayed. The 1877-8 War forced thousands of civilians, mostly Muslims, to leave their homes. These population movements irreversibly changed the demographic structure of the region. Not only during the War but also in the years following it, the newly independent nation-states in the Balkan Peninsula pursued policies that favoured ethnic homogenisation, which left minority groups in a precarious situation. In essence, the 1877-8 Russo-Turkish War was more than a political game between Russia, the Ottoman Empire, and European states. The war struck a blow against the multi-

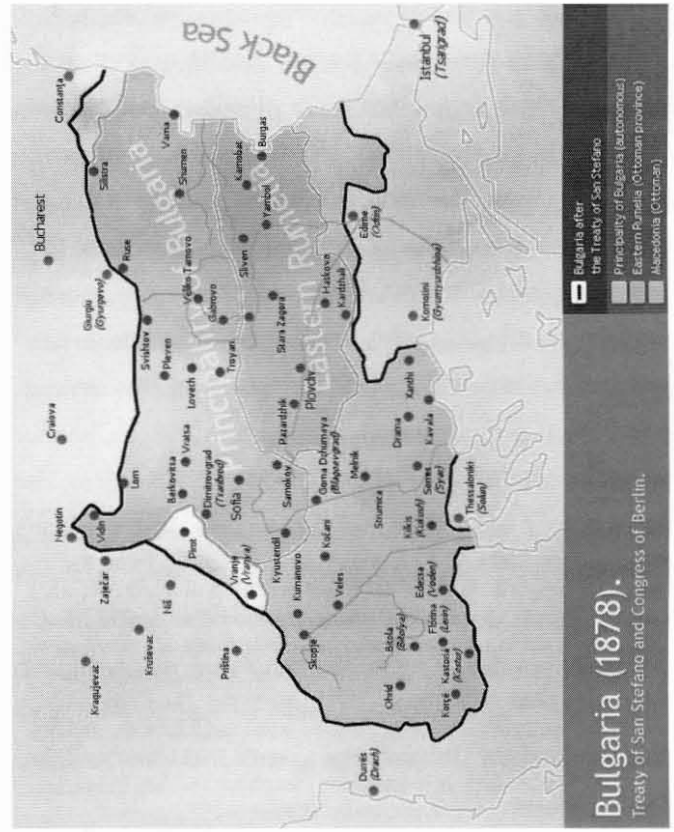
cultural and multi-religious ethos of Balkan societies and resulted in the demographic restructuring of the Balkans. A careful analysis of the population movements following the 1877-1878 Russo-Turkish War shows the fluidity of ethnic borders in the Balkans. Unfortunately, this fluidity meant that ethnic homogeneity was attained only through expulsions, massacres, and discriminatory policies towards minorities, a process that continued up to 21st century.

The Danubean Province of the Ottoman Empire - which corresponds to the autonomous Bulgarian Principality that was established in 1878 - and Eastern Rumelia - which was annexed by the Bulgarian Principality in 1885 - were far from being ethnically or culturally homogeneous territories (see Fig. 1 for a map of the region in 1878). On the contrary, this region was quite cosmopolitan in its ethnic composition.[1] After 1878, the desire to create a homogeneous Bulgarian nation-state triggered the expulsion and immigration of both Muslim and non-Muslim minorities from Bulgaria; these minorities included Turks, Greeks, and Jews.[2] The Russo-Turkish War of 1877-8 was a powerful blow to the non-Bulgarians in the region, especially Muslims. Following the war, Muslim

[1] Kemal Karpat, *Ottoman population 1830-1914: demographic and social characteristics* (Madison, 1985), pp 70-1.
[2] Mary Neuburger, *The orient within: muslim minorities and the negotiation of nationhood in modern Bulgaria* (Ithaca, 2004), p. 28.

immigration from Bulgaria to Ottoman territories developed into a continuous trend, which lasted well into the 20th century.

Fig. 1: Map of Bulgaria in 1878



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[3] (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bulgaria-SanStefano_-%281878%29-byTodorBozhinov.png) (15 Nov. 2012)

Prior to war, there was a dense Muslim population especially in the Dobruca (Dobruja) region, the east of Yantra river, the fertile sub-Balkan plains, with important centres like Eski Zağra (Stara Zagora) and Karlovo; and Maritsa valley, in which there were towns like Filibe (Plovdiv) and Hasköy (Haskovo).[4] In the southwest, there were Muslim inhabitants particularly around Köstendil (Kostenets) and the Rhodope Mountains. In the northwest, Muslim population was less sizeable compared to other regions mentioned above.[5] According to the 1874 census, Muslim population in the Danubean Province, the main theatre of war, was around

[4] Place names are indicated in the form they were officially used during the period under study. The versions in brackets are the forms that are in use today. The word 'Muslim' is preferred instead of 'Turkish', since the former is more all-embracing in the historical context. The Muslims of Bulgaria in the nineteenth century were composed of several ethnic and linguistic groups; the largest of these were Turks. Pomaks, or Bulgarian Muslims, were the second largest group. There were also Muslim in-migrants to Bulgaria from the Russian Empire throughout the nineteenth century. These were the Crimean Tatars and Caucasians, particularly Circassians. It is estimated that about 150,000 Crimean Tatars and 200,000 Caucasians settled in Dobruca, Edirne and Danubean Provinces. This Muslim in-migration increased the density of Muslim population in Bulgaria. For further information on Muslim migrations from Caucasus and Crimea to Bulgaria, see Karpat, *Ottoman population 1830-1914,* pp 65-70.

[5] R. J. Crampton, 'The Turks in Bulgaria, 1877-1944' in Kemal Karpat (ed.), *The Turks of Bulgaria: the history, culture and political fate of a minority* (İstanbul, 1990), p. 43.

490,000, a little less than half of the population.[6] Even though the region, which later became the Bulgarian Kingdom in 1908, was not as ethnically and religiously homogeneous as Bulgarian nationalists and Russian Pan-Slavists idealised, the 1877-8 War generated the opportunities to refine Bulgaria from the non-Bulgarian constituents of its population and produced a pretext to create an ethnically uniform Bulgarian state.

The political antecedents of the war go back to the Bosnian uprising of 1875 and the Serbo-Turkish war of 1876.[7] What finally ignited the war was the Bulgarian Uprising of April-May 1876. Better-educated segments of the Bulgarian society were in a process of national awakening in the second half of the 19th century, even though nationalism largely remained a middle and upper class phenomenon, and rural Bulgarian population still continued to identify themselves in religious terms. However, nationalist Bulgarian intellectuals, many of whom were educated in Russia and were acquainted with Russian revolutionary ideologies of 1860s, grew enthusiastic about Bulgarian autonomy or total independence.[8]

[6] Karpat, *Ottoman population 1830-1914*, p. 117.

[7] For further information on political and diplomatic developments in the Balkans in 1870s, see L. S. Stavrianos, *The Balkans since 1453* (New York, 1958).

[8] Charles Jelavich and Barbara Jelavich, *The establishment of Balkan national states, 1804-1920* (Seattle, 1977), pp 129-36.

Revolutionaries were far from being united in their political programs and public support for their revolutionary zeal was not as high as they imagined. Despite these, in 1876, after several failed attempts, the Bulgarian Revolutionary Central Committee seized the opportunity to organize an uprising when the Ottoman army was busy with the uprising in Bosnia. In April 1876, a revolt broke out in Panagiurishte, Koprivshtitsa, and Klisura in central Bulgaria. The Ottoman army suppressed this revolt in a bloody manner, often times using irregular troops.[9] This situation, which was publicised in Europe by British Prime Minister William Gladstone as the "Bulgarian Horrors," added further tensions to Russian-Ottoman relations.[10] Eventually in 1877, the Bulgarian Crisis and the Serbo-Turkish War constituted the pretext for Russia to declare war on the Ottoman Empire with the promise of the liberation of Bulgaria.

Not only among Ottomans but also among the British there were concerns about the true motivations behind the Russian war effort. In a letter to British Foreign Secretary

[9] Richard Millman, 'The Bulgarian massacres reconsidered', *The Slavonic and east European review,* vol. 58, no.2 (Apr. 1980), pp 218-31.
[10] W. E. Gladstone, *Bulgarian horrors and the question of the east* (London: John Murray, 1876). For a different voice within British politics, *The Bulgarian insurrection: a record of the course of events in and around Philippopoli* (London, 1877).

Edward Stanley, 15th Earl of Derby, British Consul A. H. Layard explained Russian policy in Bulgaria, "Those who have watched the proceedings of the Russians can scarcely doubt their deliberate object has been to drive the Turkish race out of the provinces they have occupied and to replace it by the Slav. Such has been the policy of Russia in other countries which she has conquered."[11] Indeed, the 1877-1878 Russo-Ottoman War resulted in the redrawing of the Balkan map. The death of thousands of civilians and massive waves of immigration from Balkans to Anatolia radically changed the demographic structure of the region. One reason for civilian casualties was bombardments of cities. Major centres such as Sofia, Tırnova (Veliko Tarnovo), Filibe, and Edirne were easily captured by the Russian army, and were not kept under siege or bombarded for a long time. The most significant numbers of civilian battle casualties occurred in Rusçuk (Ruse) and Plevne (Pleven), due to long sieges of these two cities. Following the bombardment of Rusçuk on 24 June 1877, very few of the 25,000 inhabitants remained in the city, and those who remained were waiting for their turn to leave.[12]

[11] A. H. Layard, British ambassador in Constantinople to the earl of Derby, British foreign secretary, 21 Jan. 1877, in *Turkish emigrations from the Balkans: documents,* Bilal Şimşir (ed.), vol. 1 (Ankara, 1989), doc. no. 153, p. 283.
[12] Danubian principality to the chief scribe of the imperial office, 26 June 1877, in Şimşir, doc. no. 14, p. 126.

Foreign observers reported that as a result of Russian bombardment, official buildings such as consulates and hospitals were completely ruined. The Muslim population was reported to leave Rusçuk for Varna. Foreign observers also informed about the pillage and massacre of Muslims by Bulgarian brigands in Rusçuk.[13]

On 21 June 1877, Russian General Zimmermann passed over the Danube and started the invasion of Dobruca. Sources point out that the absence of authority to restrain Bulgarian armed bands and irregular Cossack troops triggered massacres that targeted Muslim civilians.[14] The telegram of a British witness dating back to 1 July 1877 reported that Russian armies did not spare civilians and burnt down villages and cities on their passage, and irregular Bulgarian brigands accompanied them.[15] Hence, Muslim residents of the aforementioned districts started to flee with the retreating Ottoman army.[16] As the Russian army advanced, civilians retreated to positions that the Ottoman army still kept. Fugitives from Dobruca and the shores of the Danube River

[13] M. Jacquot to Journal des débats in Paris, 2 July 1877, in Şimşir, doc. no. 17, p. 128.
[14] *The extermination of Turkish people by Russia, and the true policy for England* (London, 1878), pp 1-4.
[15] *Russian atrocities in Asia and Europe during the months of June, July, and August 1877* (Constantinople, 1877), p. 12.
[16] Governorate of Tulça to the ministry of interior, 23 June 1877, in Şimşir, doc. no. 13, p. 126.

were joined by new groups of immigrants as they moved southwards. The ill-treatment of local Muslims and other non-Bulgarian minorities was exemplified by various accounts of foreign observers. Consul Blunt, who was charged with investigating the situation in the war zone, reported that 3.500 fugitives, among them Turks and Jews from Eski Zağra, arrived at Edirne in August 1877. These fugitives claimed that immediately after Russian forces occupied the town, they distributed the arms surrendered by Turks to Bulgarian military groups, and this was followed by the retaliation of Turkish forces.[17] British ambassador Layard stated that even though it would be unfair to blame Russian government and generals for deliberately encouraging massacres, he warned against "influential persons who believe that the only way to Russianize Bulgaria, and to reduce the province to a complete state of dependency on Russia, is to destroy or remove the whole Mussulman population from it."[18] He drew attention to British consular reports that revealed acts of violence not only against Turks, but also against Greeks and Armenians. He argued that such violent acts leave bitter memories and produce a feeling of mutual animosity between peoples, and make coexistence of different ethno-religious groups an

[17] Layard to earl of Derby, 5 Aug. 1877, in Şimşir, doc. no. 74, p. 179.
[18] Ibid., 1 Aug. 1877, in Şimşir, doc. no. 65, p. 169.

impossible dream. Layard stated that even if peace was signed, 'Russia would leave these rich provinces in a state of religious antagonism, which it would take generations to efface.'[19]

Civilians who managed to escape from their towns and villages in the war zone were not any safer on their immigration routes. Irregular Bulgarian military bands and Cossack cavalries attacked many refugee convoys, in some cases totally annihilating the fugitives, without sparing women and children; as in the example of the massacre in the Bjala forest on 12 September 1877.[20] Layard's report reveals another attack on a different refugee convoy:

> They [Bulgarians] state that several hundred (600 or 700 was the number mentioned) Mussulmans were escaping from that place [Tırnova] with their wives and children in carts. A body of Cossacks, accompanied by some Bulgarians, overtook them. The fugitives attempted to defend themselves, and some Cossacks, it is alleged, were killed. Their companions then fell upon the convoy and slaughtered man, woman, and child.[21]

As early as July 1877, refugee convoys arrived at cities such as Varna, Edirne, and İstanbul. Those who managed to

[19] Ibid., 3 Aug. 1877, in Şimşir, doc. no. 70, p. 175.
[20] Server Pasha, minister of foreign affairs, to Musurus Pasha, Ottoman ambassador in London, 12 Sept. 1877, in Şimşir, doc. no. 92, p. 197.
[21] Layard to earl of Derby, 26 July 1877, in Şimşir, doc. no. 61, p. 165.

escape from the massacres in their towns and villages, or from attacks on refugee convoys in the countryside, encountered new problems when they ended up in big cities as refugees. In addition to the misery caused by cold and lack of clothing, the day-by-day increase of refugee numbers led to disorder, famine, and epidemics that the Ottoman government could not effectively deal with. According to a report by British Major F. de Winton written in 20 November 1877, there were about 8,000 fugitives in Edirne; 4,000 in Filibe; 30,000 on the road between Botevgrad and Sofia, and a further 23,100 in the Sofia sub-province.[22] When the cities fell to the Russian army, fugitives fled in front of them. At the end of the war, on the eve of the signing of the Berlin Treaty in July 1878, it is estimated that there were approximately 40,000 fugitives around Drama, 200,000 in Şumnu (Shumen), 200,000 in İstanbul, 150,000 around the Rhodope Mountains, 50,000 in Gümülcine (Komotini), and 60,000 in Xanthi.[23] Refugees, for the most part, fled on their oxen-carts, or simply by walking, and if they were lucky enough to find one, by train. British ambassador Layard reported that in early 1878, there were around 200,000 fugitives in Shumla, Pravadi, and

[22] Major de Winton to Layard, 20 Nov. 1877, in Şimşir, doc. no. 106, pp 232–5.
[23] Ömer Turan, *The Turkish minority in Bulgaria, 1878-1908* (Ankara, 1998), pp 144–5.

Osmanpazar, and in the surrounding countryside, without proper shelter, clothing, and food.[24] In a letter to British ambassador Layard, Colonel Walter Blunt, an English officer in the Turkish Gendarmerie, depicted the misery of the fugitives in trains:

> The discomfort of these poor people can be somewhat imagined when I inform you that each station crowds were waiting with their orders signed, ready to jump into any nook or corner they could find. On this account women and children were afraid to leave the carriages, lest they should lose their places, even for the calls of nature. The air, therefore, in some of the closed wagons, was beyond conception and probably was the cause of much of the mortality that occurred and the sickness now existing. Nearly every disease was represented from small-pox downwards.[25]

If thousands were killed as a result of massacres, an even greater number of people died from starvation and disease. In his report on the conditions in Gümülcine, Henry Fawcett, British Consul-General in İstanbul, observed that thousands of people were sleeping on the streets of the city, and typhoid fever and dysentery were widespread causes of death among immigrants. He further added that the conditions in mountainous regions were even worse, since famine was

[24] Layard to earl of Derby, Jan. 9, 1878, in Şimşir, doc. no. 127, p. 260.
[25] Blunt to Layard, 1 Feb. 1878, in Şimşir, doc. no. 185, pp 322–3.

rampant in the countryside. He reported the note of another British investigator, who discovered convoys in the countryside made up of hundreds of women and children, without a man among them. In several villages, the British investigator found women, aged from 14 to 65, "huddled together as naked as they were born, their wretched rags having entirely fallen out of them."[26] Typhus, typhoid, and smallpox were the most common epidemic diseases among the refugees. Because they took shelter together, every disease could easily spread from one person to the rest of the convoy. Until April 1878, of the 45,000 refugees in Edirne, 16,000 had typhus, and between 100 and 120 people died every day.[27] By the same date, 18,000 refugees in İstanbul died as a result of diseases. Even though 60,000 refugees were relocated from İstanbul to other areas, there were still 160,000 refugees in İstanbul.[28] Several individuals, charity organisations, and states, primarily Britain, tried to relieve the conditions of the refugees. However, such individual attempts were not enough to deal with the huge exodus of thousands of people.[29] The Red Cross and the Vatican City also sent help in various

[26] Fawcett to Layard, 9 July 1878, in Şimşir, doc. no. 314, pp 513–6.
[27] French consul in Edirne to French ministry of foreign affairs, 15 Apr. 1878, in Şimşir, doc. no. 250, p. 409.
[28] Layard to the Marquis of Salisbury, British foreign secretary, 28 Apr. 1878, in Şimşir, doc. no. 257, p. 423.
[29] Fawcett to Layard, 9 July 1878, in Şimşir, doc. no. 314, pp. 513–6.

forms, but their charity was rather symbolic and fell short of relieving the misery of the refugees.[30] In addition, these grants were dependent on domestic and international circumstances and could have been suspended under unfavourable conditions.[31] The Ottoman Empire, with its limited financial resources, was not capable of alleviating the conditions. Ottoman relief organisations like *İane-i Muhacirin* (Refugee Aid) contributed little to the living standards of refugees.[32] Although the Ottoman government tried to raise customs duties of İstanbul for a limited period to form a fund for refugees, the Ottoman proposal for a refugee fund could not be realized due to the rejection of the United States.[33]

On 3 March 1878, a peace treaty was signed in San Stefano near İstanbul between the Ottoman Empire and Russia, to be revised by the Berlin Treaty in July 1878. Berlin Treaty granted autonomy to the Bulgarian Principality, which in fact meant *de facto* independence. For refugees who wished to turn back to their homelands after the signing of the peace

[30] Karateodori Efendi, Ottoman ambassador in Brussels, to Safvet Pasha, Ottoman minister of foreign affairs, 30 May 1878, in Şimşir, doc. no. 281, p. 470; Turhan Bey, Ottoman ambassador in Rome, to Safvet Pasha, 9 July 1878, in Şimşir, doc. no. 313, p. 512.
[31] Fawcett to Layard, 26 Dec. 1878, in Şimşir, doc. no. 471, p. 742.
[32] Refugee aid commission to the grand vizier, 3 June 1878, in Şimşir, doc. no. 287, p. 476.
[33] Layard to Marquis of Salisbury, 16 Aug. 1878, in Şimşir, doc. no. 343, p. 575.

treaty, serious problems awaited. Charles Brophy, the British Vice Consul in Burgas, reported that when refugee families, including Muslims and Jews, started to come back to Burgas and surrounding villages, some Bulgarians in the city protested their repatriation, seeing Muslims and Jews as the vestiges of the Ottoman rule. Several villages in the region were burnt down to dissuade refugees from coming back. Brophy observed a local rally, in which crowds shouted, "Long life to our Tsar Alexander! Away with the Turks and Jews! Bulgaria for the Bulgarians!" Although there were a number of Bulgarians who helped and gave shelter to refugees, both refugees and Bulgarians who helped them were targets of attacks.[34] There were several attempts to create European Commissions to oversee minority rights and provide safe repatriation of refugees who left their homes during the war, but these attempts did not produce any results because Russia rejected the proposals to establish a European Commission.[35] Apart from the maltreatment by Russian officers and local policemen, once they returned, many refugees found their houses ruined and land occupied by Bulgarians.[36] Many

[34] Brophy to Layard, 24 Aug. 1878, in Şimşir, doc. no. 353, p. 585.
[35] Plunkett to marquis of Salisbury, 25 Aug. 1878, in Şimşir, doc. no. 354, p. 587.
[36] F. R. J. Calvert, British vice-consul in Filibe to Layard, 25 Sept. 1878, in Şimşir, doc. no. 372, p. 615; Petition from Turkish refugees in Yanbolu and İslimye to Russian governor-general of Edirne, 29 Sept.

refugees simply abandoned their lands, without the opportunity to sell. Between 1878 and 1883, 70.70 per cent of the total land sale in Bulgaria was from Muslims to Christians, and by 1900, Christians bought 600,000 hectares of Muslim land. It should be kept in mind that these figures only show the recorded land transfer, however most of the lands were simply abandoned.[37] Lack of security of life and the arbitrary seizure of property discouraged many from returning.[38] In addition, they were not, in many cases, allowed by Russian authorities to return to their homes.[39] Instead of providing security for returning refugees, Russian General Stolypin proposed a population exchange between Muslim refugees from Eastern Rumelia and Bulgarians in the Ottoman Empire.[40] This move was obviously designed to ensure ethnic homogeneity of

1878, in Şimşir, no. 386, p. 637; Petition from Turkish refugees to European commission of eastern Rumelia, 18 Oct. 1878, in Şimşir, no. 396, p. 654.

[37] Crampton, 'The Turks in Bulgaria', p. 47.

[38] British acting consul at Adrianople Calvert to Layard, 9 Oct. 1878, in Şimşir, doc. no. 381, p. 631.

[39] Danubian principality to the grand vizier, 12 Oct. 1878, in Şimşir, doc. no. 388, p. 639.

[40] Sir Wolff, British commissioner in eastern Rumelia, to the marquis of Salisbury, 29 Oct. 1878, in Şimşir, no. 404, p. 661.

Bulgarians in Eastern Rumelia, but this plan was not accepted by the Ottoman Empire.[41]

As a result of the Russo-Ottoman War, from 1893 to 1902, it is estimated that more than 70,000 people immigrated out of Bulgaria, overwhelming majority of them went to Turkey. Apart from that, nearly 250,000 people, about 17 per cent of the former Muslim population of Bulgaria, died as a consequence of famine, disease, and massacres.[42] From the pre-war Muslim population of 1,500,000, only a little more than 500,000 Muslims were counted in the first Bulgarian census in 1881.[43] In addition, there was persistent Bulgarian in-migration from Macedonia and Thrace. These two years radically changed the ethnic picture of Bulgaria. The war was only a start for the huge exodus of non-Bulgarians from Bulgaria. With the help of war, Bulgaria, following the pattern set by other nation-states in Balkans, initiated policies to secure ethnic and religious homogeneity within its borders. However, also similar to other Balkan states, this dream of ethnic homogeneity never became a reality, but led to further inter-ethnic tensions in future. Although the Berlin Treaty

[41] Safvet Pasha, grand vizier and minister of foreign affairs, to Asım Pasha, Ottoman commissioner in eastern Rumelia, 5 Nov. 1878, in Şimşir, no. 411, p. 667.

[42] Karpat, *Ottoman Population,* pp 72-5.

[43] Karpat, 'Bulgaria's methods of nation building and the Turkish minority', p. 12.

guaranteed religious, linguistic, and cultural rights for the minorities in Bulgaria and granted them the right to preserve their ways of life, this new minority status had considerable psychological effects on people. Living under non-Muslim rule was a completely new experience for Bulgaria's Muslims. After being the dominant culture for hundreds of years, it was difficult for Muslims to get accustomed to living in the new Bulgarian state, which desired to establish closer links with Europe, rather than the Ottoman Empire. In time, Bulgarian language and culture prevailed over others and the signs of Ottoman rule were slowly or sharply erased. For instance, of the forty-five former mosques in Sofia, many were transformed into stores, printing-houses, museums, and even a prison.[44] Moreover, ill treatment of Muslims, in many cases within the confines of law, obligation of military service, increasing tax burdens, lack of representation in political life, and a biased judicial system deterred many from living in Bulgaria and caused further immigration waves afterwards. Consequently, Bulgarian lands, where Muslim population was once dominant, both in terms of their population and political power, evolved into modern Bulgarian nation-state. The 1877-78 War constituted an important turning point in the creation of this new Bulgaria.

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[44] Crampton, 'The Turks in Bulgaria', p. 54.