Aleksander Stamboliski and the Bulgarian Contract

Bulgaria suffered a swift and devastating defeat in the First World War, due, **G.D. Sheppard** argues, to its peasant leader-in-waiting's shrewd use of propaganda.

BULGARIA WAS THE last country to enter the First World War on the side of the Central Powers, in 1915. In 1918 it became the first to capitulate. Bulgaria's sudden military collapse was significant in that it both presaged and probably hastened the defeat of its more powerful allies, Germany and Austria-Hungary.

After three years of trench stalemate in Macedonia, a multinational Entente force launched the Vardar offensive on September 14th, 1918. It swept through the Bulgarian lines, putting its army to flight, leading to the country's capitulation within two weeks. The war was over within two more months.

With the opposing forces on the front at roughly equal numbers, the Bulgarian army's collapse of 1918 has until now been attributed largely to war-weariness, poor morale and a shortage of food and clothing. It turns out that there may be more to its poor performance than that. Two British officers, prisoners of the Bulgarians, were witnesses to an act of shrewd political propaganda by a man waiting for his chance to seize power, Aleksander Stamboliski, the charismatic leader of the peasants' party, the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BANU).

Fearless, barrel-chested and black-haired, Stamboliski was born in a Bulgarian village in 1879 to a peasant farmer of ten hectares. Running away from home to gain an education, he joined the newly formed Agrarian Union and began to develop its political ideology, neither socialist nor communist but dedicated to furthering the lives of his fellow Balkan peasants. It placed Stamboliski and his party at odds with the country's ruling faction, headed by Ferdinand I, a Viennese-born aristocrat elected tsar in 1887.

In the Balkan war of 1912, in alliance with its neighbouring states, Bulgaria had revolted against the long rule of the Ottoman Empire. The Balkan allies expelled the Turks from much of the peninsula. This success, however, was short lived, as the fledgling states began warring among each other over disputed territories, Macedonia being chief among them. In 1913 Bulgaria was out-manoeuvred and defeated by Serbia and Greece. In a short space of time Bulgaria had won and then lost the coveted Macedonia.

The fighting of 1912 and 1913 had cost Bulgaria dearly in both lives and money and the government of Ferdinand was not keen to become embroiled in the resulting war between the great powers. For a year Bulgaria remained neutral, courted by both sides. In October 1915, however, Ferdinand was eventually persuaded to join the Central Powers with the promise of regaining Macedonia. Stamboliski, an opponent of the war with Entente sympathies, had the temerity to quarrel violently with Ferdinand over the issue and was imprisoned as a result.

Barrel-chested: Aleksander Stamboliski, 1900.

Prison gossip

Initially the war went extremely well for Bulgaria. Attacked on two fronts, Serbia was rapidly overrun and Macedonia regained. Too late to be effective, Entente forces were shipped in via Salonika and sent north towards the Macedonian front in an effort to meet up with their Serbian allies. Outnumbered, British troops were badly mauled in the snow and rugged terrain and forced to retreat to the Greek border.

Among those wounded and taken prisoner by the Bulgarians in December 1915 were two young British lieutenants, D.J. Cowan and R.G. Howe. Somehow escaping death by frostbite or disease, they spent the next three years making increasingly audacious attempts to escape. Incurring the fury of their captors for doing so, they were punished by transfer from one Bulgarian prison camp to another. The regimes varied greatly: one camp was little more than a typhus-ridden killing ground. But throughout 1918 the two

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friends' final place of captivity, in the north-central town of Sevlievo, was far from being a prison. Entering into a gentlemen's agreement with the local commander, they were given virtual freedom, provided they agreed to not escape. Both men had a gift for languages and, with Cowan's previous experience as a medical student, they set up their own dental practice, mainly pulling rotten teeth. This peculiar captivity afforded them a perhaps unique position to hear intelligence from all stratas of society.

After the war's end and their release both men joined the British diplomatic service. However, they rarely again met and it was quite separately that they wrote of what they had heard among Bulgarians during the year of 1918. In 1931 Cowan wrote via the Foreign Office to the British official war historian Cyril Falls, then compiling his second volume of the Macedonian campaign. Cowan summed up what Bulgarians everywhere had told him:

Our contract with the Germans is for three years and for three years only. And at the end of that time we will be replaced on the front by German troops and the Bulgarian army will be demobilised to its peace-time strength.

Cowan added: *It was common talk ... not advanced as a rumour but as a statement of fact ... In early September 1918 I was told ... that the men definitely did not intend to carry on after the three year limit had been reached.*

Cowan could not recall the precise date that was fixed in the minds of the soldiers, but thought it may have been somehow linked to Bulgarian mobilisation (variously recorded as September 22nd or 24th, 1915) and more or less

coincided with the Vardar offensive (September 15th-29th, 1918). He had no doubt that the bulk of the Bulgarian army 'simply left the front with the intention of returning home'.

Rise and fall

Despite Cowan's keen offer to discuss the matter, he and Falls appear not to have met. In his 1935 volume Falls makes only the briefest of references to rumours of a contract and attributes them to 'gossip of the rest-camp and dugout': this despite the fact that Falls also records an incident where retreating Bulgarian officers had explained to the mayor of a town near Strumica that the troops had anticipated the contract's end by three days.

Nor did Falls mention Cowan also explaining that he had initially presumed the contract to be a piece of Entente propaganda. Staying on in Bulgaria for a further six months after his release and serving with military intelligence, he had learned that it was not so. Nor did Falls refer to Cowan returning as a diplomat to Sofia in 1929, where he was told by Bulgarians that the contract story had stemmed from the by then dead Stamboliski.

Falls may not have dealt with the contract so lightly had he consulted Cowan's fellow prisoner, R.G. Howe. In retirement in the 1970s, Sir Robert Howe wrote an unpublished autobiography describing his rise from the son of a Derby rail-worker to becoming governor-general of Sudan. He also described hearing in 1918 of the contract. The soldiers had the same answer, he explained: 'Always the same, "do we know when the war will end, it will end next September". Always the same word – contract.'

Overthrown: the crowd at Sofia following the coup that deposed Stamboliski, 1923.

But Howe had yet more evidence to supply. Remarkably, he also described meeting Stamboliski himself at the royal palace in Belgrade in early 1923, only months before the Bulgarian leader's assassination. After defeat in the First World War, Ferdinand had abdicated in favour of his son. The Agrarian party had swept to power on a tide of popular support and Stamboliski had become prime minister. In Belgrade Howe queued with other foreign diplomats waiting for an audience with the visiting Bulgarian leader:

On being introduced I spoke to him in my best Bulgarian and he expressed surprise. We had a long talk and I told him something of my experience as a prisoner of war and I told him about 'the contract'. He smiled hugely and said 'You are quite right – I did that', and he told me how he did it. In prison he concocted the story of the contract and through his agents in the party spread it throughout the army.

Howe noted: 'As an example of psychological warfare this has seemed to me without parallel.' He made a good point. Stamboliski knew the wants and desires of his own people absolutely; the overwhelming majority of Bulgarians were peasant farmers who cared little for war or politics. Appealing to their desire to return home, the contract was a simple and yet masterful piece of propaganda.

Beset with economic problems, crippling war reparations and surrounded by internal enemies, Stamboliski's peasant government proved short-lived. In June 1923 he was overthrown, tortured and killed by, among others, IMRO, a Macedonian terrorist group who considered him a traitor who had signed away Bulgarian territory as the price for peace. Today, however, Stamboliski is something of a Bulgarian national hero. The tiny house in which he was born is preserved as a museum. Nevertheless, perhaps due to the decades of Bulgarian conflict and political turbulence that followed his assassination, knowledge of the contract and its hidden origins almost died with him.

Propaganda for peace

Just how important was Stamboliski's contract in Bulgaria's capitulation? By the summer of 1918 the Bulgarian army was in a parlous state and in no position effectively to resist a concerted attack. But it is often said that morale is all important in war and the evidence produced here indicates that a widely held belief in the contract had indeed undermined the Bulgarian army's willingness to continue and was a significant factor in the country's defeat. As to the human cost, though many Bulgarian soldiers were killed in retreat, there can be little doubt that more lives would have been lost on both sides had they held their ground and fought. Another result was Bulgarian territory escaping much of the ravages of invasion. An ignominious defeat also ensured the end of Ferdinand's reign, another Stamboliski aim.

But what of the contract's impact on the wider conflict in Europe? At the time of Bulgaria's capitulation its allies were already in full retreat on all fronts; so the Macedonian front cannot be said to be a deciding factor in the First World War. Although it was the catalyst of the Great War, the Balkan conflict had rapidly become a sideshow. Nonetheless, Bulgaria's sudden fall left its neighbouring ally Turkey isolated from Germany and Austria-Hungary and placed an even greater pressure on the governments of the Central Powers to seek an armistice; having your allies capitulate at a time of crisis cannot fail to have an effect. During this late period the war was still inflicting huge numbers of casualties (as many as 10,000 on the final day). If the contract and Bulgaria's sudden exit hastened the end by a only few days or weeks, an evidenced assertion, then it probably prevented many thousands of further deaths.

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