

VASILIJ ŠTRANDMAN [BASIL DE STRANDMAN], *BALKANSKE USPOMENE* [BALKAN REMINISCENCES]. BELGRADE: ŽAGOR, 2009, pp. 466.

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The memoirs of the Russian diplomat Basil Nikolaievich Strandman, who served as a representative of the imperial government of Nicholas II Romanov in the early twentieth century, were published for the first time in Serbian in 2009. Basil Strandman served in almost all Balkan capitals: in Sofia and Constantinople (1908–1909), Cetinje (1910–1911), Belgrade and Niš (1911–1915 and 1919–1924). As a participant in and witness to the dramatic events that shook the Balkans – the Young Turk revolution in Constantinople, Bulgaria's declaration of independence, the Austro-Hungarian annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1908), the Pig War between Serbia and Austria-Hungary (1906–1909), the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), and the outbreak of the First World War (1914) – the conscientious diplomat Strandman maintained official correspondence with his government in St. Petersburg, the governments of the countries to which he was accredited as well as with other foreign diplomats. He also kept a diary, noting down his personal impressions about persons and events and, in doing so, produced valuable material which later served as a basis for this book.

The *Balkan Reminiscences* are now accessible to the readers owing to the effort of Jovan Kačaki, who spent years searching for the manuscript, and the Belgrade-based Žagor publishing house. The Serbian edition of these memoirs has been the first to see the light of day, thus paying homage to a man and diplomat who devoted his entire life to the good of Russia and Serbia, the countries he equally considered his own.

Emperor Alexander II, through his personal envoy, stood as godfather at Strandman's baptism in the church of Al-

exander Nevskii in Paris. In 1888, at the age of eleven, he enrolled in the prestigious Page Corps in St. Petersburg, also attended by Serbian Princes Djordje and Alexander Karadjordjević. He graduated in 1897 as top cadet in his class with the rank of sergeant. On the occasion of the coronation of Emperor Nicholas II in 1896, Strandman was a designated bearer of the imperial insignia. In 1906, after four years of service at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he was appointed secretary of the Russian diplomatic mission in Darmstadt, the hometown of Tsarina Aleksandra, and at her suggestion. Two years later, he was transferred to the same post in the Russian Legation in Sofia and in 1910 to the Embassy in Constantinople as second secretary. During the latter posting he was sent to assist the Russian minister in Cetinje during the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Prince Nikola Petrović's reign and his coronation as King of Montenegro, which Strandman described in his memoirs.

Promoted to first secretary of the Legation in Belgrade in September 1911, he arrived in Serbia and remained there for nearly three decades (with the exception of the four-year period between 1915 and 1919). In Belgrade, he witnessed the tortuous negotiations between Serbia and Bulgaria about a Balkan alliance, preparations for, the outbreak and consequences of the Balkan Wars in 1912–1913, and the prominent role played, throughout these events, all of which are detailed in the memoirs, by the Russian minister Nikolai Genrikhovich Hartwig. In particular, Strandman revealed the extent to which his superior was involved in the

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conclusion of the Serbo-Bulgarian agreement aimed against the Ottoman Empire, which largely coincided with his own view of the political situation: in facilitating this convention Hartwig showed little regard for the Russian minister of foreign affairs, Sergei Sazonov, whom he disliked as much as he disliked his colleague in Sofia, Anatolii Nekliudov.

After the outbreak of the Great War Strandman moved from Belgrade to Niš together with the Serbian government and spent there the first year of the war. In December 1914, Count Grigorii Nikolaevich Trubetskoi was appointed Russian minister to Serbia. He was considered to be a pro-Bulgarian diplomat. However, in his writings, Strandman tried to defend him against these “malicious assessments”. Trubetskoi promoted Strandman to the post of first secretary of the Russian Embassy to Italy. It was in Rome that he received the news of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and the brutal execution of the imperial family. This tragic event plunged him into depression from which he never fully recovered. In 1918, the last year of the war, he was a volunteer in the “heroic” Serbian army. Regent Alexander greeted him cordially and bestowed the rank of cavalry captain 1st class on him. He remained on the Salonika Front until November 1918, when Sazonov summoned him to the Russian Embassy in Paris during the Peace Conference. After the war, he remained in Belgrade as “extraordinary and plenipotentiary minister” of the White Russian government headed by Admiral Kolchak until 1924. After the Second World War and the communist revolution in Yugoslavia, he became an exile again, spending the last days of his life in Washington, USA.

It was in Washington, in the 1950s, that he wrote his *Balkan Reminiscences* without any intention of ever having them published, which adds to the credibility of his account. It should be noted that

he chose to write his name in its French form, as Basil de Strandman, probably for political reasons: for the most part of his life he was officially and privately engaged in opposing aggressive Germandom and for that reason must have found the use of the “von Strandman” form out of place.

Strandman’s memoirs offer a wealth of information about the nature of diplomacy, behind-the-scenes actions of diplomats, their mutual relations, largely dependent on the relations between their respective countries, the attitude of the Russian diplomats serving in Belgrade towards the imperial government in St. Petersburg and the Russian diplomatic representatives in other countries. His records provide a lucid account of the complexity of diplomacy, of the occasional brutality, ruthlessness, discomfort and contradictions in which a diplomat’s personal traits can sometimes interfere with official policy despite the instructions received. Nothing essential has changed in diplomacy over the centuries: relations have always been determined by the relative strength and power of different states. In particular the great powers have never been too scrupulous in pursuing their goals.

Strandman’s memoirs fill a major lacuna: they shed light not only on Russia’s policy towards the Balkans, but also on his personal views on the troubling “Balkan questions”. These views evolved from the restrained official attitude at the beginning of his service in Belgrade to an overt pro-Serbian stance during and after the First World War. In this context, Strandman’s views seem to fall somewhere between two polarised opinions which marked Russian diplomacy in the Balkans and were propounded by Strandman’s superiors in Serbia. Hartwig, Russian minister in Belgrade, was an Austrophobe, pan-Slav and decidedly pro-Serbian, and he was quite inclined to interpret the official policy of his For-

eign Ministry according to his own lights, which made him immensely popular in Serbian governmental and political circles and among the general public. In conversations with Strandman, officials of the Serbian Foreign Ministry used to refer to prime minister Nikola Pašić's almost daily consultations with Hartwig in a characteristic manner: "Our beard is consulting with your beard" (both men grew impressive beards). Hartwig's many opponents in St. Petersburg thought of him as being a representative of Serbia at the Russian court rather than Russian minister in Belgrade. Strandman recalls that the influential Russian politician N. Girs wrote that Hartwig should follow the interests of Russia and not Serbia – Hartwig's Austrophobia was outmatched only by his Anglophobia. Girs also added that Hartwig, on account of his pronounced pro-Serbian stance, should be moved to Bucharest "where he would cause less damage".

After the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum to Serbia in July 1914, Hartwig died of a heart attack, and was buried in Belgrade. His funeral was attended by all prominent Serbian political and public figures, even by a delegation of farmers who came from various Serbian regions to pay their respects to the diplomat whose name they affectionately Serbianized: Nikola Hartvić. In the fateful days following the Sarajevo assassination and Vienna's firm reaction, Strandman became, in his capacity as *chargé d'affaires*, a temporary head of the Russian diplomatic mission in Belgrade. During this nerve-wrecking political and military uncertainty, the eyes of Serbian politicians and the court were turned to him as a representative of mighty Russia, Serbia's traditional protector and ally. He was not prepared for such a tremendous burden of responsibility: his late superior failed to acquaint him more closely with Serbian politicians and intellectuals, pre-

sumably partly because he disapproved of Strandman's initially firm adherence to the official policy of the Russian Foreign Ministry which required utmost caution, suppression of "Serbian excessive foreign policy ambitions" and avoidance of provoking Austria-Hungary in any way.

More important for the history of Serbia are Strandman's accounts of his conversations with Regent Alexander, in particular the one in the course of which the former persuaded the latter that he rather than his father, King Peter I (as suggested by the Cabinet), should send a telegram to Tsar Nicholas II pleading for urgent help and support to Serbia at the critical moment following Austria-Hungary's ultimatum. The description of Pašić's and Strandman's reaction to the long-awaited reply of Nicholas II that confirmed Russia's decision to stand by Serbia in any eventuality is rather striking: "On that day, late in the evening on 28 July, I was handed a coded telegram from Sazonov which took longer than a day to arrive. It contained the following reply of Tsar Nicholas II to Prince Regent Alexander's telegram: 'Your Royal Majesty, having addressed me at the extremely difficult moment, you have not been mistaken about the feelings which I nourish for You and my abiding affection for the Serbian people. The current situation commands my most serious attention and my government spares no effort to overcome the current difficulties. I have no doubt that Your Majesty and the Royal Government will be imbued with desire to make that task easier and will not fail to do anything possible that will bring about the solution which will prevent the horrors of a new war while preserving the dignity of Serbia. As long as there is the slightest hope to avoid bloodshed, all our efforts must be directed towards that goal. If, however, despite our most sincere wishes we fail in our endeavour, Your Majesty may rest as-

sured that Russia will not be indifferent to Serbia's fate in any eventuality.' I was ordered to forward the telegram to the addressee. Given the late hour at which the deciphering had been completed, I decided to wait until morning, hoping that Prince Regent would arrive in Niš during the night. But my expectations did not materialise so I decided – in order to avoid further delay – to hand in the telegram to Pašić. Despite the early hour, I found Pašić in his office. Having quickly read the telegram, he – it seemed to me – turned to stone at first, and then got extremely excited. He crossed himself and said: 'Lord, Great Merciful Russian Tsar.' He got out of his chair, came up to me and we kissed each other. His eyes were full of tears. Such manifestation of the emotional distress of a man whose entire life had been a difficult school of self-control and restraint and who had faced death several times in the past could illustrate the extent to which he had been emotionally strained over the last few days – since the survival of his beloved and dear Serbia was at stake. The telegram of Lord Emperor provided not just hope, but also a confirmation of the rectitude of firm reliance on the support of Russia. Although the Prince Regent's arrival was not expected before the evening, the content of the Tsar's reply was immediately relayed to Kragujevac on the telephone."

Interestingly, Strandman devoted several chapters to the aggressive media campaigns of some countries, notably Austria-Hungary, during the Balkan Wars. The Austro-Hungarian press wrote at length and with abhorrence about the barbaric war of the Ottoman succession waged between half-civilized Balkan states and voiced constant charges of the alleged crimes committed against "innocent Muslim civilians" in "European Turkey". These charges were levelled against the Serbian army, although it duly

respected all conventions of international law in times of war, as confirmed by the newspapers correspondents from the theatre of operations. The Serbian army was highly disciplined, unlike the Bulgarian army. Strandman points out that the Bulgarian army committed many massacres on the frontline, but they were not reported by the international press. It was Austria-Hungary, anxious about Serbian victories that hampered her Balkan and Middle Eastern policy, that stood behind such an aggressive media campaign against the "evil Serbs".

According to Strandman, Austria-Hungary was keeping a close watch on every step of the Belgrade government in order to seize on any opportunity which could be used against Serbia and her political goals. Since such opportunities were not forthcoming, the Dual Monarchy did not shrink from staging them, seeking for international legitimacy to send her army to the Serbian border. The case of the Austro-Hungarian consul in Prizren, Karel Prohaska, clearly demonstrated the lengths to which Vienna was prepared to go in order to falsely accuse Serbia. In November 1912, there were rumours that the Serbs mistreated, even killed, the Austro-Hungarian diplomat. The "unacceptable" behaviour of the Serbian army towards the representative of the "friendly" Austro-Hungarian Empire was widely reported about across Europe.

What really happened in Prizren? The Serbian military prevented Prohaska from maintaining encrypted communication with Vienna and restricted his activities to purely consular affairs. This measure was provoked by the consul's overt instigation of local Albanians to rise against Serbia. The incident strained relations between Serbia and Austria-Hungary so much that it brought them to the brink of war. In Strandman's opinion, Austro-Hungary came very close to delivering an ultimatum to the Serbian

government on that occasion and plunging Europe into a full-scale war. It took Prohaska's return to Vienna and his confession that he had not been deprived of anything in Prizren, less alone tortured, to relieve the tension.

Strandman's impressions of the diplomatic representatives of other European countries, gained on his arrival in Belgrade, are rather interesting. He revealed that in 1911 the Russian minister Hartwig had nurtured friendly relations with his French counterpart Descos alone. The two diplomats had already met in Tehran, and their cordial relations in Belgrade were interpreted to have stemmed from the mutual exchange of information concerning the latest developments in the Balkans. However, Hartwig was cautious in his dealings with Descos and kept really confidential matters to himself; purportedly, he began to doubt the Frenchman's good judgement since the latter did not consider the outbreak of a war in the Balkans possible.

As for the British minister to Serbia, Sir Arthur Paget, Strandman did not find him politically far-sighted either. The Briton was convinced that Serbia would eventually be absorbed by the Habsburg Monarchy. On one occasion, Paget told Strandman that the British government had no plans to build its Legation in Belgrade "because there was no reason to do so".

As for the German minister to Serbia, Baron Griesinger, Strandman wrote that he had been a "nothing in every respect". Due to her commercial interests, Germany had her consulate in Belgrade the head of which, consul Schlieben, was "much smarter and more sociable than his Minister and, along with his wife, a quite frequent guest at Hartwig's".

Austria-Hungary was represented by Baron Ugron. His predecessor, Count Forgách, was remembered by the Serbs for his active role in the farcical 1909

"High Treason Trial" of leading members of the Serbian community in Croatia in Zagreb and the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908. For those reasons, Strandman noted, Baron Ugron had to count with an open national boycott of trade with Austria-Hungary. He left the impression of a kind person prepared to discuss matters, but he was not like that on further acquaintance. He used to walk down the middle of the street rather than the sidewalk. It was rumoured in Belgrade that Ugron did so out of fear of a possible attack and to avoid having something dropped on his head from the upper stories of buildings.

Basil Strandman's memoirs bear witness to the abiding affection with which he came to view Serbia and the Serbian people. He manifested his affection and concern for Serbs during the first year of the war in Niš, when he spared no effort to impress on the Russian government and other Allies the necessity to alleviate the difficult position of occupied Serbia and her people.

Strandman's *Balkan Reminiscences* have importance as a source for the political and social history of the Balkans, diplomatic history, anthropology, political science, even for literary consideration.