

V A R B A N T O D O R O V

THE SOCIETY "ORIENTAL CONFEDERATION"
AND ITS ACTIVITIES DURING THE 80TIES
AND 90TIES OF THE 19TH CENTURY

The existence of the Society "Oriental Confederation" is a fact known in historiography. So far however, the history of this association has not been touched on by a single study. L. S. Stavrianos, in his book *The Balkan Federation* refers in a fleeting manner to the existence of an "Oriental Confederation" Society, as one of the many organizations, which sprang up during the 80ties of the 19th century¹. Nikolai Todorov, in his article *Zahari Stoyanov and the Idea of a Balkan Federation* deals in greater detail with the ideology of the society². The author reveals the ties between Zahari Stoyanov and the Athens committee, in particular with Leonidas Voulgaris, on the basis of Zahari Stoyanov's correspondence, and compares their ideas and views on the formation of a Balkan federation.

This paper aims at presenting an analysis of the ideology and activities of the "Oriental Federation" Society. It is based above all on the official documents of the association kept in Kleon Rangavis' archives³, Ioannis Petroff's archives⁴, the reports of the British Embassy in Athens⁵ as well as material from the Athenian press during the 80ties⁶. Alongside with these sources there exists the wide correspondence of the society with different persons, including well known public figures and politicians. Thus it will be possible to reveal fully the ties of the committee with similar associations in other Balkan countries and with separate functionaries in the Balkans, which shall be the subject of a future study.

1. L. S. Stavrianos, "*The Balkan Federation*", Connecticut 1964, p. 150.

2. Nikolaj Todorov, *Zahari Stojanov i idejata za Balkanska federacija*, *Istoričeski pregled*, kn. 2, 1977.

3. Κέντρο Έρευνας Ίστορίας Νεοτέρου Έλληνισμού, *ἀρχεῖο «Κλέων Παγκαβῆς»* (KEINE).

4. Βιβλιοθήκη τῆς Βουλῆς, «*Άλληλογραφία Πετρῶφ*» Α'.

5. PRO, "Foreign Office" - 32/539, 563, 565.

6. «*Παλιγγενεσία*» - 1884, 1885, 1886, 1887.

The following documents on the “Oriental Federation” Society, founded and functioning in the 80ties of the 19th century have been referred to:

The Statute⁷, dated October 29th, 1884, is the first basic document. The goal of the society is stated in article One: “Cordial understanding with other similar organizations in the remaining countries and co-operation in order to achieve an Oriental Federation of all Balkan states against any foreign domination”. The remaining articles reflect its structure, functions of leading bodies, accounts etc. The seal of the association represents an eagle, holding a serpent, in its claws, and a band, held in its beak, with the motto: “In Union Lies our Strength”. The Statute ends with the enumeration of the leadership of the Society: Chairman - D. N. Botsaris, General Secretary - Ioannis Evtaxias, and the 16 members of the Board, including among them Leonidas Voulgaris, a figure of Pan-Balkan standing, who played an active role in Greek political life in the course of over half a century. Also included here is the decision for the publication of two papers, in Greek and French, and the issuing of Broadsheets on special occasions.

A hand-written address in French bearing no date was distributed early in 1885. It brings out the financial difficulties the paper of the association ran into after its establishment and also the reaction it aroused in the Greek and Austrian press⁸. According to the British Ambassador to Athens, after the third issue the paper’s distribution was banned in the Balkan provinces of Turkey⁹. This forced the society to use lithographic distribution, which turned out to be better suited to conditions in Turkey. A report in the newspaper “Paligenessia” makes it clear that the lithographic reprints were published in Greek, French and Turkish, the latter intended for the Albanian population¹⁰. The same address also considers the situation in the Ottoman provinces, as well as the policy of the Porte at setting the separate Balkan nations against one another. Unfortunately to the present day we have not yet found an issue of this paper, which would allow the tracing of the activities of the society as a whole. However we came across several printed addresses as well as letters and appeals, which give sufficient information on the political orientation of the paper and the ideas it promoted. These addresses were not ordinary appeals

7. KEINE - *Κανονισμός του ἐν Ἀθήναις κεντρικοῦ συλλόγου τῆς Ἀνατολικῆς Ὁμοσπονδίας* - 1884.

8. KEINE - *ἀρχεῖο «Κλέων Ραγκαβῆς»* - A proclamation to the subscribers of the *Iztochna Federatsia* (Eastern Federation) Newspaper.

9. PRO, “FO” 194-195/4.6.1885.

10. *«Παλιγενεσία»* N. 6299, 16.5.1885.

to the subscribers for subscriptions and financial support, but also contain the basic principles of the programme of the paper and reflect the views of the Board of the society.

An address, dated April 2d, 1885, issued by the editorial Board of the paper, reveals the principal aims of the association—a federation of the Balkan countries against foreign domination on the Balkans¹¹. Not only the dangers to the society and its followers in the Turkish provinces are pointed out—persecutions, arrests, etc., but also the difficulties they had to overcome on the part of interested circles in Austria and even in Greece. The association rejects the attacks of the Greek and Austrian press and castigates Austria, which saw the Oriental Federation as a hindrance to her Balkan policy. The address concludes with an appeal to "all noble and freedomloving people" who support the ideas for a Balkan federation, to join the association.

Two official letters, dated May 28th, 1887 and March 20th, 1888¹² follow chronically and give the outlines of the activities of the society, its development and impact among various circles. The first letter was sent by the society to Kleon Rangavis, Ambassador to Sofia, at the time, the second to Alexandros Rangavis, a well known diplomat and scholar and one of the leading outstanding figures in new Greek history¹³. Kleon Rangavis was elected Honorary Member of the association and at the same time its representative in Sofia, a proposal put forth by the ephor of the Greek society L. Voulgaris and in accordance with a decision of the Board. His father Alexandros Rangavis was elected Honorary Member of the Board and was given a Diploma¹⁴. These two letters, as well as others, addressed to the prominent Greek merchant Ioannis Petroff, resident in Russia, give an idea of the constantly growing role of the association, which won followers among the leading political, business and cultural circles in Greek society within the course of only several years.

The last three documents connected with the Macedonian riots of 1888, the uprising in Crete, the massacre of the Armenians in Constantinople, 1890, allow us to draw a full picture of the organization, its leaning to the cause of national liberation and the struggle of the remaining nations under Ottoman rule¹⁵.

11. Έθνικὴ Βιβλιοθήκη, Τμήμα Χειρογράφων, Ε 288.

12. KEINE - ἄ. «Κλ. Παγκαβῆς» - letters No 40 & 114.

13. It is interesting to note that Alexandros Rangavis took part in the Commission, which awarded Grigor Pärličev the First Prize at the Literary Competition in Athens, 1860.

14. Unfortunately the diploma has been lost.

15. KEINE - ἄ. «Κλ. Παγκαβῆς» - letters No 209 & 212 καὶ Βιβλιοθήκη τῆς Βουλῆς - «Ἀλληλογραφία Πετρόφ» Α'.

Issue 6148 of *Paligenesia*, dated November 20th, contained an article critical of the stand of the society. It is this article, that casts light on how the association saw the future federation of the Balkan peoples¹⁶. Issues such as state organization, political and military structure as well as foreign and international policies are dealt with. Committees were to be established in Sofia, Belgrade, Cetinje, Bucharest and Athens, and elsewhere, while missions of all Balkan countries were to meet in Bucharest, Athens, or Belgrade, in accordance with the federal constitution, to work out, each separately, its foreign and internal affairs. Each state retained its national identity and political autonomy within the framework of the Federation. Foreign policy would be conducted in a manner similar to Austro Hungary—through the calling common parliaments, convened in a given town, for a certain period. Essentially agrarian countries, the members of the Balkan Federation were to do away with economic rivalry and defend their mutual interests on the basis of common customs ties and associations. The Federation was to play the part of a defensive alliance for the separate autonomous Balkan states. Hence it was to organize its armed forces, consisting of well trained units in each country. All this would lead, runs the plan, to the prosperity of the nations of the Balkan peninsula.

The above mentioned official documents, as well as several reports of the British Ambassador to Athens, kept in the Foreign Office, and a number of private letters of L. Voulgaris and Ioannis Petroff provide sufficient source material for us to draw certain conclusions and present a fuller picture of the ideological and political platform of the “Oriental Federaion” society and its activities on a pan-Balkan scale.

It is noteworthy to mark the distinction which the association makes between peoples (λαός, ἔθνος) and state (κράτος), in the light of the principal goal it set before itself: the establishment of a pan-Balkan Federation. The Statutes, as an official document, subject to approval by the government and the king refers to “A Federation of the Balkan States”. In its proclamations, however, the association exclusively addresses its appeal to the Balkan peoples.

Calling for a “federation of the Balkan Nations”, the association also had in mind the nations, still under Ottoman rule, not only those included in the liberated Balkan states. Therefore the Federation did not remain indifferent to all liberation movements in the confines of the Ottoman Empire in Crete, Macedonia, and elsewhere, and supported them. The same differentiation is

16. As the paper reported, the article was reprinted from the “Ustavnost” newspaper, a Serbian paper, which came out in Belgrade in 1884-1886, edited by Sime Popovic.

drawn between peoples and state in respect to Turkey. The Statute and the cited proclamation do not contain concrete provisions on the future Federation and the ties with it. At any rate the above mentioned article in Paligenessia, dated 1884, does not mention Turkey in the future plans for a Balkan Federation. In a letter to Zahari Stoyanov, L. Voulgaris expressed the following view: "When Roumania, Serbia, Montenegro, Albano-Macedonia, Greece, Bulgaria, and if possible, Turkey unite, they would become a major power and this Oriental Federation shall become the mainstay of peace in Europe"¹⁷. We do not know however, whether these views of Voulgaris were also shared by other members of the Association, and whether they were expressed in its official documents. Evidently this matter was discussed in the early 90ties. Issue 929 of the "Iris" (a Greek newspaper which came out in Bucharest) dated April 6th, 1891 considers whether a Balkan Federation under the aegis of Turkey is acceptable. The answer was categorical—the Turkish government could not join it, in any capacity, however the Turkish people are entitled to the same rights as the other peoples. It is mere guesswork, solely on this evidence to establish whether this brief and somewhat vague formulation simply stood for the recognition of equal rights for all nations, including the Turks, or that the society, whose practical work was directed above all to the liberation of the European provinces of Turkey, was aware, that a realistic solution was impossible without Turkish participation, or even considered the possibility of including Turkey in a future federation¹⁸.

The problem of the unification of the Balkan peoples and states and their defence against foreign encroachment was a major part of the activities of the Greek society "Oriental Federation". It repeatedly turned to these problems as is confirmed by documents that have come down to us. The proclamation, dated April 2d, 1885, as well as other proclamations, dating from 1889 and 1891 explicitly point out, that the only positive solution of the Eastern Question is the creation of a Federation of the Balkan Peoples, for it solely would lead to the fraternization of the neighbouring peoples and to "common wellbeing". The unification of the Balkan nations would become a factor, which could withstand the aggressive policy of the Great Powers. The authors of the proclamations do not hide their expectations for the further development of Europe, thus revealing the width and maturity of their views. If, the Procla-

17. N. Todorov, *op. cit.*

18. L. S. Stavrianos, *op. cit.*, believes on the grounds of the paper of the Oriental Federation Association and Francesco Crispi's Memoires that the future Federation should also include Turkey as a member.

mation runs, the Eastern Question were to be resolved in a peaceful manner, it would not only stabilize European peace, but it would also see “gigantic progress of science and technology, which would convince all nations in the need of a lasting peace, it would lead to fraternization of all nations in the world, doing away forever with the most atrocious crime-homicide”.

Evidently the founder members of the “Oriental Federation” disseminated ideas beyond the scope of the local and regional interests of the separate countries. However adherence to a common humanist ideal, which at that time appeared an utopia, in no way diverted them from their concrete aim. The champions of Balkan co-operation speak of the wellbeing of the European nations, not overlooking the fact that *de facto* it was Europe—essentially the Great Powers—which directly or indirectly oppressed the Balkan peoples. Hence one of the tasks of the association was to unmask the policies of the Great Powers and their activities in the Balkans, using it as one more natural argument for the unification of the separate nations.

True to the motto “In Unity is Force” at the same time the society reacted to all attempts of national liberation of the peoples still under Turkish rule. We have only three documents to this effect, however, they are eloquent proof of Pan Balkan solidarity with the enslaved nations.

Voicing its regret in connection with the Macedonian riots in 1888 in proclamations on this occasion, the association put forth the idea of understanding between Serbians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Albanians and Turks, for a peaceful solution of the Macedonian question. The Committee is confident—runs the declaration, that through the settlement of national contradictions in advance, the Balkan peoples may go on living in peace, on the basis of justice and mutual interests. This was not only an appeal for the liberation of Macedonia from Turkey, which had enslaved it for centuries, but rather a call for the overcoming attempt to voice hostile sentiments and the internal contradictions between the Balkan nations, which, blown up artificially, are the cause for foreign domination on the Balkans. The association also took an energetic stand against the effort of one nation to dominate another, pointing out proselytism as the bane for the future of the Balkans. The Board of the “Oriental Federation” was well aware, that the formation of a Balkan Federation was not possible without the preliminary solution of all disputed problems between the Balkan countries and above all the Macedonian question. Official documents at our disposal do not allow us to build a clear idea of the stand of the society on the Macedonian question, neither on its view on the future of Macedonia. The idea put forth by L. Voulgaris in his answer to Zahari Stoyanov, dated February 17th, 1888 is of some interest. “The sole

condition for doing away with the misunderstandings between the Balkan nations"—runs the letter, is the creation of a free and indivisible Macedonian state within the framework of the Balkan Federation¹⁹.

The association expresses its staunch support to the remaining national liberation movements of the peoples still under foreign rule. The cruel massacres in 1889 and 1890 provoked two proclamations in defence of the national and political rights of the enslaved Cretan population and the Armenians. The Committee not only called on the entire freedom-loving humanity for their interference, but openly accused the Porte and indirectly the Great Powers for the crimes, committed against the Christian population. Fraternal solidarity towards the unfortunate Armenians and their heroic struggle for national liberation was also expressed in the memorial service, organized by the Athens Committee, regardless of the open negative attitude on the part of Government circles. The Board of the "Oriental Federation" was quite right in coming to the conclusion that solidarity with the national-liberation struggles of the oppressed nations in their day would result in the consolidation of Balkan states tomorrow and hence to the cherished final goal—a pan-Balkan Federation.

The society was forced to overcome considerable difficulties, both external and internal, on the way to the realization of the idea of a Federation. The policy of the Great Powers and the Ottoman Empire was in contradiction with the goal of the Board of the "Oriental Federation" and this is reflected both in the local Greek press and the foreign press. The entire ideological, and political propaganda of the society openly clashed with the strivings of Austro-Hungary and Turkey to consolidate their domination on the Balkans. It was not without reason that the "Oriental Federation", the newspaper of the same name of the association was banned by the Turkish authorities in Albania and Macedonia after three issues came out while its title provoked violent attacks in the Austrian press. The Greek press did not fall behind, abusing the association in every possible manner as a "paid foreign body of the Slavs", which had sold Hellenic interests. Naturally, owing to the character of its policies and the singleness of purpose-rejecting foreign domination on the Balkans, the society endured Austro-Hungarian and Turkish abuse. The association was also subjected to sharp criticism by government circles and the Greek press. Commentaries on the "Oriental Federation" association, its paper, and the ideas it disseminated appeared in many issues of contemporary Greek newspapers. Alongside with the abuse, streaming from the press against

19. Н6КМ, бНА, ПА, 8825; L. Voulgaris to Z. Stoyanov, 17.2.1888.

the idea for the creation of a Balkan Federation as an unrealistic, utopian idea and a betrayal of the national interests, as an idea, springing from the imagination of “dreamers and poets”, there appear critics, who bring out the inconsistency of such a Federation in practical terms, not only at present, but in the future. The article in *Paligenessia*, dated October 16th, 1887, is a typical example of the stand of Greek ruling circles and the nationalistic and chauvinistic leanings of bourgeois public opinion. It cites, as proof of the utopian character of such a federation, the reports, coming from Great Britain, of the formation of a union between Ferdinand and the kings of Serbia and Roumania. Noting that it was impossible at this stage to overcome the deep contradictions between national goals and the aspirations of the Balkan states, the authors of the article consider the creation of the Federation at grass-root level, based on the complete rapprochement of the Balkan nations and freedom from the influence of the Great Powers a complete utopia.

Defending its positions in fact the society accused the Great Powers and Turkey of their subversive policies and the Greek government itself for its clumsy external and internal policy. It denounced the lack of foresight of the nations, set one against the other which was cleverly exploited by the Porte in establishing barriers between nations living under the same conditions. True to her motto “Divide et impera”, Turkey openly stirred up the contradictions between the Balkan nations and supported the rise of national antagonism. However, together with the sharp criticism of the policy of the Ottoman Empire, the Association appealed to the Turkish nation as such, offering it its co-operation and declaring that there was a place for it in the future Federation. Turkey would contribute to its proper existence and authority much more by uniting its interests with the remaining Balkan nations, rather than becoming an instrument of Austrian policies and the ambitions of the Great Powers interested only in Turkey’s heritage. Once again we witness the ideological heights of the champions of “Oriental Federation”, who in the name of pan-Balkan interests offer their hand and are ready to compromise with their century old enemy²⁰. Alongside with the criticism of foreign countries—Turkey, Austria, the Great Powers—the society does not leave out chauvinistic government circles with their shortsightedness and clumsy propaganda leading to the mutual destruction of the Balkan peoples. It exposes the national nationalistic governments of all Balkan countries, noting in par-

20. KEINE - *ἀ*. «*Κλ. Παγκρήσις*» - «Proclamation to the Subscribers of the Oriental Federation newspaper», not dated. Judging by the reports of the British Embassy in Athens, the proclamation was issued early in the spring of 1885, probably up to April 10th 1885.

ticular unscrupulous Greek circles, which openly undermined the foundations of Balkan co-operation and fanned hatred between the Balkan nations.

Evidently the ideas of the Greek association were accepted and won followers among the other Balkan countries early in the 1890ties. The efforts of the Athens committee for the unification of the Balkans in one Federation had its response in Bulgaria²¹, Roumania and Serbia. Evidence of this are the Resolutions of the Congress of Roumanian and Greek students, held in Giurgiu in August 1891 where it appears that the students were influenced by the views of the "Oriental Federation" association on the future structure of the Balkan Federation²². It is noteworthy in this connection to touch on a document, found in the archives of Ioannis Petroff. It is a copy of an official letter of the *Fraternal Association of the Balkan Peoples*, in Svilainitsi (Zvole-nitsi, Svolenajtsi)²³, dated April 16th, 1891, addressed to Demetrios Botsaris, the Chairman of the "Oriental Federation" society, where the ideas for a pan-Balkan Union, as well as for the bringing together of the Balkan nations are supported. It was on this basis that the association seeks to promote its activities jointly with other organizations in the Balkan countries. The date of the foundation of the association, May 19th, 1891, as well as some expressions in the letter leave no doubt that it was the response to the initiative undertaken by the Greek society. As is seen a full committee was set up with a chairman, secretary, and members of a managing board, with its insignia and seal. It is quite clear that the idea for the fraternization of the Balkan peoples in the name of a common union had already reached the stage of organizations, which had begun to spring up in the separate Balkan countries²⁴.

As is evident in this paper, the "Oriental Federation" was a society with mature concepts and clearly set goals, involving not only separate groups of people or strata of a single country, but all Balkan countries. Under political conditions prevailing at the time the association could not become a leading factor, which could influence fundamental change in the future face of the Balkans. However, with the joint efforts for the building up of a climate of trust and unity of action between the Balkan nations, with the ideas and appeals for reaching understanding and unity, the society played a role in this continuous process which is being realized some 80-100 years later.

21. Above mentioned were the ties and views of Zahari Stoyanov and Leonidas Voulgaris (N. Todorov, *Zahari Stojanov i...*).

22. «*Ιγις*», N. 939, 13.8.1891.

23. Probably the present day town of Svilajnac on the Morava river.

24. Βιβλιοθήκη τῆς Βουλῆς, «*Ἀλληλογραφία Πετρῶφ*» Α'.