

THE PROJECT FOR JOINT OCCUPATION OF EASTERN RUMELIA

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Abstract. A few months prior to the planned withdrawal of the Russian army on the 3rd of May 1879, and also as the term of the European Commission's work approached its closure, the Great Powers reached a deadlock in Eastern Rumelia. Despite the inherently liberal nature of the Organic Statute elaborated by the Commission, which aimed to grant comprehensive rights to the inhabitants of the province and to establish autonomy, the implementation of Articles XV and XVI of the Treaty of Berlin – allowing the Ottoman authorities to maintain garrisons on the border and send troops into the province – risked triggering an armed resistance from the Bulgarian population against the introduction of the Ottoman authority. In response, the Russian authorities warned that they would be compelled to return to protect the population if an insurrection broke out. However, the British cabinet declared that any such action would lead to war. To avoid this, Britain and Russia began negotiations for the implementation of a joint occupation of Eastern Rumelia by the European forces.

The project for a joint occupation engaged the diplomatic corps of the Great Powers from December 1878 to April 1879. Given the complex diplomatic challenges posed by the project, skillful maneuvering, the use of threats, and the pursuit of mutually beneficial agreements threatened to reopen the Eastern Question. The purpose of this research is to analyze Britain's political motives for introducing a foreign occupation of Eastern Rumelia in the context of the strategic interests it sought to secure in the Balkans and to examine Russia's political attitude and response to this issue.

The main sources used in the preparation of this study are documents from The National Archive, the Private Archive of Lord Salisbury and published documents from the Russian archives.

Keywords: Eastern Rumelia; Balkans; Treaty of Berlin; Joint occupation; Britain; Russia

Introduction

If the issue of Eastern Rumelia is taken out of the context of the Balkan politics in which Russia and Britain were involved, and it is considered within

the broader framework of their struggle for world supremacy in the second half of the 19th century, the rivalry between the two empires in Eastern Rumelia can be more comprehensively analysed and understood. The establishment of the province extends beyond a mere regional issue. Britain and Russia were engaged in a far-reaching struggle for influence in the Near East and Central Asia, aiming to secure the achievement of their imperial goals. During the post-Crimean War era, Russia's gradual acquisition of territories in Central Asia brought it closer to the borders of Persia and Afghanistan. This was a cause for concern for the British government, whose policy was to establish these two territories as buffer states, designed to act as a defensive barrier against a potential Russian attack on India. This threat, strengthened by the Russian advance in the Balkans from 1877 to 1878 and its approach to Istanbul – another point from which Russia could threaten British communications with India – intensified the British-Russian rivalry and simultaneously triggered the final stage of the Great Game in Central Asia and the struggle for the partition of the Ottoman Empire. In such circumstances, Eastern Rumelia was one of the pawns in the geopolitical chess game that the two empires were playing. Their rivalry from the second part of the 19th century has shaped the political map of the Balkans.

In this regard, one issue – the project for a joint occupation of Eastern Rumelia, which, if it had been implemented, would have altered the balance of power in the region and the course of historical events – remains largely outside the scope of dedicated studies. The question is an underexplored topic in Bulgarian, Western, and Russian historiography, largely due to the focus on other events, such as the elaboration of the Organic Law, the administrative organization of the province, and the national struggles of the population. The aim of this study is to fill this gap by tracing the diplomatic tensions between Russia and Britain concerning the plan for foreign intervention in Eastern Rumelia, as well as to explore the intricacies of the joint occupation proposal and the policies pursued by the two empires in this context. The Ottoman attitude toward the issue will also be examined, as it added another layer of complexity to the political strategies of both powers. This perspective would facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the influence of the British-Russian rivalry for dominance in the Near East and Central Asia on the historical developments in the Balkans. It would also shed light on the broader geopolitical dynamics of the era.

Lord Salisbury's orchestration of the division of Bulgaria and the creation of Eastern Rumelia as an autonomous province under Sultan's authority was a strategic move to prevent the Russian influence from extending into the region near the Straits, a region of immense strategic importance for the protection of British trade routes and the military defence of India. The division was agreed upon in the Salisbury-Shuvalov Memorandum, signed on 30 May 1878 (Weeks 1979, p. D1057). This agreement represented a significant compromise

between the aspirations of Britain and Russia and influenced the outcome of the Congress of Berlin. Regarding the province that had to be established south of the Balkan Mountains, the Russian authorities conceded to the British proposal that it should be given wide administrative autonomy (similar to the autonomy existent in the British colonies), with a Christian governor appointed with the consent of Europe for five to ten years. In addition, Lord Salisbury stated in front of the British Ambassador in London, Count Shuvalov, that “the dependence of this South Balkan province upon the Porte for all political and military purposes was essential in order to secure the Porte from invasion or pressure from without”¹. In order to achieve this goal, it was necessary for the Ottoman troops to maintain their presence in the province.

Conversely, the Russian Emperor emphasized the importance of the Ottoman military forces’ withdrawal, as he was concerned about the security of the Bulgarian population if they remained there (Kozmenko 1952, pp. 176 – 179). As Count Shuvalov conveyed to Lord Salisbury “the Czar would not hear of Turkish troops being retained in any of the emancipated provinces” (Cecil 1931, p. 258). At that moment, however, Shuvalov himself persisted in opinion that Russia had to acquiesce the Ottoman occupation of the province, as it was unlikely to be executed, requiring too much material sacrifices. He advised the Czar to yield on this issue (Shuvalov, p. 135).

As a result, in article five of the Memorandum, it was noted that Britain accepted the Russian objection, leaving the issue open for further debate during the Congress of Berlin. At the Congress, it was to be decided that in case of insurrection, invasion, or menace in the province, the Sultan would be given the right to send troops there. Meanwhile, it was also written in the Memorandum that Britain reserved the right to insist at the Congress on the Sultan’s authority to garrison troops on the borders of the Southern Province.² The ambiguous manner this issue was framed made it clear that it would cause considerable difficulties during the Congress and later during the organization of Eastern Rumelia. Indeed, this was a calculated political manoeuvre from Salisbury as he communicated to the Queen: “but in any case full power will be reserved to press in Congress for adequate securities for the political and strategic security of the Porte”³.

Throughout the course of the Congress, Lord Salisbury, in accordance with his strategic calculations and by using the vague language of the Memorandum, withdrew from the stipulation regarding Ottoman troops. With the support of Austria-Hungary, he secured the right of the Ottoman Empire to garrison the frontiers of the province and the right of the Governor General to summon Ottoman troops (Weeks 1979, pp. D1062 – D1063). The stipulations recorded under Articles XV and XVI of the Treaty gave rise to significant discontent among the local population on the one hand, and on the other hand, it led to a struggle of the Russian authorities to prevent their implementation through a variety of diplomatic and non-

diplomatic means. Hence, the plan for a joint occupation became a diplomatic tool for both Russia and Britain; Russia employed it to oppose the Ottoman occupation of Eastern Rumelia, while Britain saw it as an alternative to the weakness of the Ottoman Empire to impose its authority in the province and as a means of pressure against Russia's aspiration in the province.

At the Congress, it was further agreed that a special European Commission should be established for the oversight of the administration and financial management of the province until the completion of its organisational framework. The Commission was to consist of representatives from the Great Powers, namely Britain, Russia, Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Italy, and the Ottoman Empire. Its primary mandate was to draft the Organic Statute of Eastern Rumelia, to define the prerogatives of the Governor General, establishing the administrative, judicial, and financial structures of the province, and formulating the regulations and functions of the militia (Statelova 1983, p. 13). Later, the meetings of the Commission became the primary arena where conflicting political views regarding the future administration of the province clashed.

The idea of occupation of Bulgaria by mixed forces was first put forward by Count Andrassy during the Congress of Berlin, with the objective of ensuring a smooth transition of authority in Bulgaria (at that time, no distinction was made between the two Bulgarian entities) following the withdrawal of the Russian army. Its aim was to pacify the Bulgarian lands and guarantee peace. He argued that the situation in the region was such that the dissatisfaction of the Bulgarians, expressed through a series of petitions, could be determined and that it would require the intervention of an army of 10,000 to 15,000 troops composed of mixed forces from the European powers. Britain, without hesitation, expressed its support for the measure and the readiness to send its troops. Count Andrassy associated this proposal to the provisions regarding the Russian occupation period of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia, suggesting that it should be reduced from two years to six months (Ikononov 1885, pp. 51 – 52). Although Count Shuvalov was successful in preventing the implementation of the plan, the idea of a mixed occupation of the Bulgarian territories subsequently formed part of Lord Salisbury's political strategy for reducing Russian influence in the region.

The proposal to introduce a mixed occupation in Eastern Rumelia first became a topic of discussion within diplomatic circles in November 1878, when the Russian authorities took the position that the challenging circumstances prevailing in the province would result in a postponement of their withdrawal from the province (Medlicott 1963, p. 199). In December 1878, the British authorities raised the issue again. One of Britain's most significant concerns with regard to the province was maintaining order after the evacuation of the Russian army, which was essential to facilitate the transition period of transferring authority to the Ottoman administration. This would secure the British policy to limit the Russian advancement

north of the Balkans. However, these concerns grew as the end of the European Commission's mandate and the handover to Ottoman control approached. Indeed, Count Shuvalov reported in his dispatch on 23 December 1878, that Lord Salisbury was constantly alluding to the question of the joint occupation. The British Foreign Secretary complained about the actions of the Russian commissioners in Eastern Rumelia, accusing them of encouraging the Bulgarian population to oppose the implementation of the Berlin Treaty. In response, Shuvalov highlighted the impracticality of bringing together several armies of different nationalities, arguing that such a combination was unlikely to consolidate the peace in Europe. Salisbury emphasized that only Russia could remove these inconveniences, as it alone had sufficient influence over the Bulgarians to either accept or reject Europe's decisions. In the event of an attempted insurrection by the Bulgarians against the implementation of the Treaty, a joint occupation would be executed as a countermeasure (Osvobozhdenie 1967, p. 350). Evidently, Salisbury used the threat of the mixed occupation to exert pressure on Russia to change its political course.

At the end of December, the British authorities decided to intensify their pressure on the issue, bringing the matter to the diplomatic table and probing the attitudes of the other powers and the Ottoman Empire. The reports of the British Commissioner in Eastern Rumelia, Henry Drummond Wolff, regarding the political situation in the province and the sentiments of the population were extremely disturbing. The militia that had been formed was being trained and commanded by Russian officers "bound up heart and soul with the Bulgarian movement". Almost every position in the administration was occupied by a Bulgarian citizen involved in the movement against the restoration of the Ottoman authority. The population continued to be armed and drilled, and half of the Turkish population had left. The Ottoman authorities had not yet begun preparations for the gendarmerie, which was supposed to be sent to the province. Moreover, according to Wolff, the remaining four months would not be enough for the Porte to gain the necessary experience to take control of the province. In this situation, in order to re-establish its authority, the Porte could only exercise its right under Article XVI to introduce its army, which would lead to repression and counteractions by the inhabitants of the province.⁴

Wolff warned Salisbury about the necessity of taking specific measures to avoid a collision. Anticipating that the Ottoman authorities might accept an occupation by foreign forces, he insisted that the matter should be discussed in the Commission if it could be raised by the representatives of other governments. Meanwhile, on 21 December, the British Ambassador in Istanbul, Henry Layard, received a telegram from Wolff requesting him to ascertain the opinion of the Ottoman authorities. The British Commissioner stated that the proposal originated from General Stolypin as a measure to pacify public opinion, which strongly opposed the return of the Ottoman troops. Subsequently, the Russian Consul General Tzeretelev also discussed with Wolff the idea of a mixed occupation as an alternative to the entrance of Otto-

man garrisons into Eastern Rumelia (Kozmenko 1978, p. 52). It was apparent that compromise solutions had to be sought in order to break the deadlock in Eastern Rumelia and to prevent any possibility of a military conflict. It could be assumed that Wolff was prompted to propose the mixed occupation, partly due to the dire circumstances in the province and partly by some hints on the issue he had received from Russian representatives. Following the discussion held with Shuvalov on the 23rd of December, in which Salisbury proposed the use of a mixed occupation as a means of addressing the violation of the Treaty of Berlin, on the 24th of December 1878, Lord Salisbury authorised the British Commissioner to engage in consultations with the other representatives from the Commission regarding a foreign occupation. However, he desired the proposal to be presented not as the official position of Britain, but rather as Wolff's own idea. Moreover, Salisbury instructed Wolff to exercise caution in his statements to avoid any implication of a commitment on the part of the British government.⁵ Lord Salisbury acted cautiously on this matter, as the issue was so controversial that an uncalculated British involvement could interfere with the British policy in the region rather than support it.

The response of the Ottoman authorities to the Layard's interpellation was the anticipated one. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Caratheodory Pasha, strongly objected to the project, arguing that the occupation of Eastern Rumelia would be a violation of the Treaty of Berlin. He warned that such an action would discredit the current government appointed to carry it out "to the letter, and in the spirit". Threatening to resign, the Foreign Minister emphasized that it was the duty of the Ottoman government to exercise the Sultan's right to intervene by authorizing the Governor General to summon regular Ottoman troops to join the militia, in order to quell disturbances and maintain order. The extraordinary circumstances – namely, the possession of arms by the Bulgarian population and their readiness to resist the restoration of the Sultan's authority by force – were regarded by the Ottoman statesman as exaggerated by the Russian authorities, who were well aware that a mixed occupation, composed of troops from different nationalities, could not be accomplished without risking serious disagreements among the Great Powers.⁶ A foreign occupation would not only be a violation of the Treaty of Berlin, but also a dangerous prerequisite for subsequent interference in the internal affairs of the empire, threatening its integrity. Other Great Powers interested in the Ottoman lands, such as Austria, would probably claim the necessity of settling a military contingent in Novi Pazar and Macedonia. France might also wish to send troops to certain parts of the Ottoman territories, and Italy would probably seek to do the same on the Albanian coast.⁷

The proposal was rapidly dropped by the British Government, and on 31 December, Salisbury instructed Wolff not to raise the issue of a mixed occupation any further for the moment, as it risked pushing the Ottoman Empire into Russia's arms if Britain continued to press the issue.⁸ At the time, negotiations were in progress

for the signing of a definitive treaty between Russian and the Ottoman Empire. Meanwhile, on 6 January 1879, Salisbury wrote to Elliot: "We have not informed Germany or any other Power that the project for mixed occupation has been abandoned. The only possible foundation for the story is, that in consequence of the irritability of Turks on the subject, Wolff and Layard have been instructed not to speak of it for the present."⁹ From its inception, Lord Salisbury harbored serious concerns about the mixed occupation project. The Sultan's dependence on Russia was one of the possible scenarios that caused him the greatest concern. This would result in Britain losing its ability to exert control over regions such as the Straits, the Suez Canal, the Persian Gulf, and the shores of the Levant – areas of strategic importance in protecting the route to India.

Furthermore, the joint occupation caused concern among the Great Powers to the same extent as it did among the Ottoman Empire. Italy expressed fears and suspicions that the plan was actually designed to place Austria in Salonica.¹⁰ Prince Bismarck insisted that the measure would inevitably lead to international quarrels, which could ultimately result in war.¹¹ The prevailing attitude among the powers constituted a significant obstacle to reaching a unanimous decision on the issue, leaving Britain to pursue the joint occupation unilaterally.

The introduction of joint occupation represented a secondary plan for the British authorities, who also expressed reservations about its feasibility and effectiveness. For Lord Salisbury, if the organization of Eastern Rumelia and the appointment of Governor General were satisfactorily resolved, "the chance of Europe being compelled to have recourse to a mixed occupation would be infinitely reduced".¹² It was, therefore, of greater importance for Britain that the Sultan should be able to establish his authority independently, as this would secure British containment policy towards Russia in the region.

The situation in the province further deteriorated at the beginning of 1879, when the work of the European Commission came to a standstill. A considerable number of issues were blocked, prompting the commissioners to engage in futile debates with no tangible outcomes. With the exception of Russia, the Great Powers managed to unite around the idea of a mixed occupation (Milyutin 1950, p. 107). A fragile consensus was reached regarding the project, though this unity was precarious and easily threatened by conflicting priorities. Furthermore, over the next three months, the issue was further complicated by a split in the opinions of the Russian authorities. It was a situation that Salisbury found curious. While Count Shuvalov and General Stolypin, who initially strongly disliked the idea of a mixed occupation, eventually changed their stance and saw it as the only feasible remedy for the volatile situation in Eastern Rumelia, the idea was still strongly opposed in St. Petersburg. As a result, Britain, without entirely abandoning the plan for a joint occupation, had preferred to wait until the danger became so great that a joint occupation would be a measure demanded from it rather than imposed by it.¹³

Meanwhile, the British authorities, in line with their policy, urged the Ottoman government to take the necessary measures without “lose not an hour” and initiate preparation for the Gendarmerie, with the objective of maintaining order and ensuring that the province remained entirely under Sultan’s rule. They warned that if this did not happen, the Ottoman authorities would be responsible for the European intervention and its consequences.¹⁴ Since the Ottoman Empire had firmly rejected a mixed occupation, it needed at least to possess the power to enforce the provisions of the Treaty.

It was not long before the mixed occupation became a desired measure. The circumstances in the province indicated a significant risk of another crisis emerging, which threatened to spread throughout the Balkans and impede the withdrawal of Russian troops from the region. The general administration of Eastern Rumelia remained under the authority of the Governor General of Bulgaria. The local militia, which according to the Treaty was supposed to be placed under officers appointed by the Sultan, was instead commanded by Russian officers and composed of recruits not only from the province but also from the Principality of Bulgaria. Moreover, the incendiary actions of Prince Dondukov, which were in defiance of the official Russian policy for the fulfillment of the Treaty of Berlin and were censured by the Emperor, resulted in a further deterioration of relations between Russia and Britain with regard to Eastern Rumelia (Milyutin 1950, p. 107). Almost all representatives of the Great Powers were unanimous in their opinion that the inhabitants were being prepared to resist the implementation of the provisions of the Treaty of Berlin, and that the entrance of the Ottoman troops would result in further bloodshed. To avoid this scenario and prevent the further undermining of both the Ottoman authority and the Great Powers – which had come together to ensure peace and prosperity in the region – immediate measures had to be taken. In this situation, Britain and Russia exchanged accusations, each attempting to shift responsibility in the event of an outbreak of disturbances in Eastern Rumelia.¹⁵

Notwithstanding the aforementioned tensions, both Britain and Russia were cognizant of the necessity to reach an accord on Eastern Rumelia and reconcile their respective political demands. In February, some correspondence was exchanged with reference to the profound unrest among the population in Eastern Rumelia. On the 27th of February, Count Shuvalov and Lord Salisbury met to discuss the situation. The Russian ambassador firmly stated that “the entry of Turkish troops into the province was to be avoided at any price”, implying that such a move could result in the return of the Russian forces, with war as the inevitable outcome – a conclusion reached by Salisbury himself. Therefore, Shuvalov revisited to the idea of a joint occupation, acknowledging that, while it was unacceptable to Russia, he would urge his government to accept it and even to propose it.¹⁶

There was considerable doubt as to whether Britain was prepared to engage in armed conflict over Eastern Rumelia. In a private letter to Wolff, following

Shuvalov's visit, Lord Salisbury admitted that a war seemed unlikely. Britain's involvement in the Anglo-Zulu War (January 1879 – July 1879) had weakened its position.¹⁷ Besides Africa, Britain was also entangled in a conflict with the Afghans in Central Asia, largely a response to the reception of General Stoletov's mission in Kabul in July 1878 (Gillard 1977, p. 139). So, Salisbury anticipated that the situation in the province would likely end with the Ottoman troops under the supervision of European officers, though not without some bloodshed, as the well-armed and trained Bulgarians were expected to resist.¹⁸ The British authorities were well aware of the significant dangers that existed within the province. As a result, Britain was prepared to negotiate, suggesting that if Russia made sincere efforts to maintain stability in the Ottoman Empire, the British authorities would do their part to ensure peace in Central Asia. However, any concessions from Britain would be futile if Russia did not act to preserve peace in the Balkans, as further instability in that region would threaten the balance of power in Europe.¹⁹

In line with the discussions held with Lord Salisbury, at the beginning of March, Shuvalov proceeded to St. Petersburg, as he put it, "to preach" the idea of a mixed occupation. In the meantime, Lord Salisbury reinforced his conviction that some form of military presence was essential in the province as the Russians were preparing to leave. In the event that a joint occupation proved impossible, then the Ottoman troops would have to be deployed, though he acknowledged the difficulty of achieving this.²⁰ For London, a joint occupation was seen as a required alternative because of the Ottoman Empire's inability to impose its authority in the province. It was necessary to implement a measure that would prevent Russia from gaining access to the Straits of Constantinople and the Aegean Sea.

At the same time, when the issue of foreign occupation in Eastern Rumelia reappeared on the diplomatic stage, a controversy over the election and personality of the Governor General, as well as the dislocation of the Ottoman garrisons, represented a conflict-escalating situation. These issues became intertwined. While Count Shuvalov was en route to St. Petersburg, the newly appointed British Consul, Lord Dufferin, held several meetings with the Russian Emperor, Prince Gorchakov, Giers, and other members of the Russian government. In accordance with Salisbury's instructions, Dufferin was charged with pressuring the Russian authorities to reach concrete agreements regarding Eastern Rumelia. The first meeting with the emperor took place on the 12th of March. The emperor's general attitude was that Britain and Russia needed to find common ground to avert the danger in Eastern Rumelia. He provided a personal guarantee to implement the Treaty of Berlin, reiterating his opposition to the appointment of Rustem Pasha as Governor General and emphasizing the necessity of limiting Ottoman garrisons in the Balkans and their deployment in specific locations.²¹ Prince Gorchakov spoke in the same way and even more firmly. He made it clear that they would continue to oppose the entrance of the Ottoman troops, rejecting the British proposal for the Balkan garrisons

commanded by the European officers. He argued that “the strength of these Turkish garrisons should be agreed upon beforehand, inasmuch as the position assumed by the Porte ought to be one of defense and not of attack; and that the locations where the Turkish garrisons were to be stationed should be precisely indicated”²². In return, Russia assured the British authorities that “neither the Emperor nor his armies would countenance or protect inhabitants of Roumelia in resistance to the introduction of regime provided under Treaty” and it would exert “all its influence to induce Roumelians to acquiesce in the approaching settlement”. The British authorities, on their part, assured that reciprocally they were ready to urge the Porte to respect the rights and privileges of the population in the province in accordance with the Organic Statute.²³

Meanwhile, Shuvalov conducted consultations with his government. It seemed that his mission to convince Russian government circles to accept the idea of a mixed occupation had been successful. On 18 March 1879, he held a meeting with Milyutin, trying to persuade him that the mixed occupation was the only way to prevent the Ottoman forces from re-entering Rumelia, as no other solution was found. Shuvalov successfully secured Milyutin’s support (Milyutin 1950, p. 126). On 19 March 1879, an imperial council was held during which, according to Milyutin, Shuvalov developed his idea effectively. After a long debate, he received the emperor’s support. Gorchakov objected vehemently, and although Giers disapproved, he remained silent during the discussion. The emperor ordered the three to prepare a circular telegram in response to the British authorities. Gorchakov, in disagreement with the decision, did not sign the note, allowing Giers to sign instead (Milyutin 1950, p. 126). On the same day, the circular was addressed to London, outlining three points regarding the maintenance of order in Eastern Rumelia. The first point referred to the mutual assurance of urging the Porte, in the form of positive instructions, to uphold the administrative laws and privileges granted to the province. The second point concerned the right of the Governor General to summon the Ottoman troops to the province, a right to which Russia attached great importance. This would only be implemented after the European governments approved the motives and the necessity for calling the troops, in accordance with the Treaty of Berlin. The third point expressed Russia’s readiness to discuss the measure of mixed occupation and “the details and means of carrying it into effect.”²⁴

On the 25th of March, Lord Salisbury presented the Russian proposal before the House of Lords. He described the precarious situation in Eastern Rumelia and presented three possible courses of action: prolonging the Russian occupation, allowing the Ottoman occupation, or initiating a European occupation. Prolonging the Russian control would (he warned) only serve to extend the current state of affairs. The Ottoman occupation would likely incite violence, further destabilizing the region. However, a European-led occupation would send a clear message to the population in Eastern Rumelia and in the Balkans that Europe was determined to

act as an impartial arbiter and would enforce its decisions. Salisbury firmly concluded that Europe had no desire to see the Eastern Question re-emerge.²⁵

On the day when London was informed about the intention of the Russian authorities to adopt the mixed occupation plan, Shuvalov was certain that the crisis was nearing its end. In a conversation with Duffrin, he even suggested that the Ottoman authorities should begin preparing their fortresses and barracks to receive their troops, considering that the arrangements would not entail the exclusion of the Balkan garrisons. Moreover, Shuvalov believed that the current plan should exclude the requirement for European Cabinets' approval to summon the Ottoman troops to the province.²⁶ However, subsequent developments altered this confidence.

The Russian authorities proposed an occupation of the province for one year following the withdrawal of the Russian troops. The occupation force would consist of 10,000 to 15,000 troops, drawn from contingents of the Powers willing to contribute, but excluding the Ottomans. Lord Salisbury delayed his response until the cabinet meeting. In the meantime, he stated to the Russian representative, Bartholomei, that if this measure was adopted, two conditions would be of utmost importance. Firstly, the consent of the Ottoman authorities must be obtained, and secondly, the Ottoman troops had to be allowed to take part in the mixed occupation. Additionally, the mixed occupation had to be in accordance with the provisions of the Treaty of Berlin and to avoid modifying it, thereby preserving all the rights and privileges guaranteed to the Ottoman authorities.²⁷ Thus, referring to these two conditions, Britain accepted the Russian proposal in principle.

However, it was apparent that Russia would not acquiesce to the Ottoman Empire's participation in the joint occupation. Shuvalov attempted to refute Lord Salisbury by insisting that the Porte had already given its approval by signing the 15th protocol²⁸ without expressing disapproval of the measure. He also pointed out that, according to the provisions of the Treaty, the Ottoman Empire had the right to station troops only on the border of the province (not within it), except in cases of disorders when the Governor-General had the right to summon Ottoman troops in the interior. Salisbury hinted that the Sultan himself might prefer to keep his troops on the frontier, openly suggesting Ihtiman and Burgas as locations.²⁹ Shuvalov saw in Lord Salisbury's reservations a circumstance in which the project might fail, threatening European peace. He stated: "Lord Beaconsfield and Lord Salisbury have given me their confidence. Let them then give me credit when I affirm that the presence of European contingents without Turks is the only way to maintain order and save the Treaty of Berlin". If this scheme were accepted, the Ottoman troops would remain on the southern border of Eastern Rumelia. Furthermore, if Britain was able to secure the cooperation of France and Italy in order to send British, Austrian, French, and Italian contingents, then Shuvalov was ready to propose that his government retreat north of the Balkans and thus withdraw from the joint occupation.³⁰

In fact, the concessions that Shuvalov was ready to make to the British authorities were ones that the Russian government was unlikely to agree to. Both Gorchakov and Giers were averse to Count Shuvalov's final plan of a mixed occupation, which raised concerns among the Russian authorities about the potential for the expansion of another power's influence in this region of the Balkans. Giers emphasized that such an arrangement would expel Russia from the province "for whose benefit she had expended so much blood and treasure while Austria was left in possession", all the while allowing the Ottoman government to retain its right to garrison in the Balkans.³¹

The idea of a mixed occupation somehow became entangled in the domestic political struggles of the Russian government, giving the impression that the Russian authorities were speaking with two voices on the matter. Two issues need to be clarified. The first concerns the real motives of the Russian government in proposing the occupation of Eastern Rumelia, given that from the very beginning, it had strongly rejected any form of military presence in the province. The second issue concerns the role of Shuvalov in this process and his position on the matter.

Kozmenko argues that the Russian proposal for a mixed occupation was a well-calculated diversionary manoeuvre in the diplomatic fight against Articles XV and XVI of the Berlin Treaty, orchestrated by Count Shuvalov (Kozmenko 1978, pp. 76 – 77). Elena Statelova supports this view, suggesting that Russia relied on the lack of consensus among the Great Powers (Statelova 1983, p. 47). G. Todorov, without mentioning the Russian proposal from 19 March 1879 or Shuvalov's diplomatic activities, explains Russia's acceptance of a mixed occupation as a strategy for maintaining its leading role in Eastern Rumelia for two more years (Todorov 1958, pp. 389 – 390). Medlicott and Weeks maintain that Shuvalov intended to "sell the plan for mixed occupation in St. Petersburg", recognizing his diplomatic efforts as a reflection of personal rivalry between Shuvalov and Gorchakov (Medlicott, Weeks 1986, pp. 428, 431). Indeed, evidence from Salisbury's correspondence indicates that Shuvalov was a desired successor for the post of Gorchakov.³² It seems reasonable to suggest that Salisbury may have incorporated Shuvalov into his strategy to undermine Gorchakov and restore Shuvalov's reputation through the successful implementation of the mixed occupation. This possibility cannot be dismissed. Nevertheless, the reality probably falls somewhere between these several perspectives. The proposal for a mixed occupation was a means of diplomatic pressure skilfully employed by both Britain and Russia in pursuit of their political objectives.

So, what were Shuvalov's motives for proposing the mixed occupation? His actions, aligned with the measure, can be explained by the political directives he was compelled to follow during the Congress of Berlin. Before attending the Congress, he was advised by the military circles to secure peace at any cost, and his actions reflected this urgency (Shuvalov, pp. 100 – 101). It can be assumed that when the situation reached a point where the population of Eastern Rumelia – drilled and

armed – expressed its willingness to resist the entry of the Ottoman troops, the Russian authorities had already declared their readiness to defend the Bulgarians against the Turks. Furthermore, with the British fleet positioned in the Dardanelles, Shuvalov probably felt compelled to propose the mixed occupation as a possible solution to the crisis, believing it was necessary to prevent further escalations.

The Russian circular proposal of the 19th of March could not be considered as a coordinated diplomatic move between Gorchakov and Shuvalov, as their rift deepened after the Congress of Berlin.³³ Shuvalov's quarrel with Gorchakov had reached such a point that they hardly communicated at all.³⁴ Acting independently and without instructions from his government, Shuvalov proposed a mixed occupation to Salisbury on 27 February. The following day, on 28 February, he wrote to Gorchakov, arguing that this measure would be safer than the Ottoman troops, stating that a spontaneous proposal from the Russian government would thwart any hostile intrigues (Medlicott, Weeks 1986, p. 426). Therefore, the initiative appeared to be a personal undertaking by Shuvalov and lacked the requisite support in St. Petersburg to achieve success. Gorchakov, for his part, saw an opportunity to impede the British plan to diminish the Russian advance through either an Ottoman or a mixed occupation of Eastern Rumelia, particularly through an unfeasible scheme that excluded the Ottoman troops. On the other hand, Shuvalov's credibility in St. Petersburg was once again undermined.

However, Shuvalov once again "entreated" Lord Salisbury to modify his two reservations, particularly the one regarding the entry of the Ottoman troops, as he considered that everything, including peace itself, depended on this. On the day he made this appeal, he expressed to Duffrin his "great annoyance of the difficulties and opposition he was encountering here in his endeavours to arrive at a reasonable settlement", blaming the "unwise" actions of Prince Dondukov and the Russian agents in Eastern Rumelia. Duffrin made an observation that Count Shuvalov had powerful enemies in St. Petersburg who were ready to undermine his policy in hopes to discredit him in the eyes of the emperor. Therefore, Duffrin advised Lord Salisbury that it would be in Britain's interest "to strengthen Count Shuvalov's hands as much as we can and to enable him satisfy the emperor that his Councils have been favourable not only to the tranquillity of Europe, but to the best and highest interests of Russia".³⁵

Disagreements within the ruling circles in St. Petersburg intensified after the Congress. One fraction was content with the signing of the Treaty of Berlin, as it spared the Russian Empire from the prospect of a continued war. The other fraction, influenced by Pan-Slavism, criticized the diplomatic corps, viewing the Berlin Treaty as a failure. This division was also reflected in the Russian policy in Eastern Rumelia.

During the ongoing negotiations in St. Petersburg, Istanbul continued to maintain the view that the mixed occupation opposed the Treaty of Berlin and that it "would be a leap in the dark fraught with danger to Turkey". In order to prevent this, the

Ottoman government expressed their readiness to cede to Rustem Pasha and accept the nomination of a foreign subject as Governor-General.³⁶ Consequently, the British ambassador communicated to the Grand Vizier that if the Ottoman government refused the proposal now, they would satisfy all their adversaries while ignoring the advice of their allies. Lord Dufferin, Count Shuvalov, Count Andrassy, and Sir H. Wolff, each had their own insights, and as supporters of the Berlin Treaty, they were strongly advocating for a mixed occupation. On the other hand, Prince Gorchakov and the military fraction at the Czar's court were firmly opposed to it and might retract their recent proposals if they could delay until Shuvalov's leave. Therefore, the moment the Ottoman's refusal became known, it would likely lead everyone to expect a bloody conflict in Eastern Rumelia.³⁷

At the beginning of April, the final stage of the question of the mixed occupation was revealed. The Porte's vague attitude on the issue threw Britain into confusion. The British authorities once again applied pressure, even threatening that the province would remain under the Sultan's rule only if the proposal was accepted immediately; otherwise, it would be too late. The Russian proposal for a mixed occupation was then considered by the Council of Ministers, and the Sultan confirmed the Council's decision to accept it.³⁸ However, two days later, in the morning, Lord Salisbury learned that the Minister of Foreign Affairs had shown Mr. Malet a Circular that rejected the proposal. On the evening of the same day (Wednesday, the 2nd instant), Musurus Pasha communicated a lengthy telegram from his Government to Lord Salisbury, proposing satisfying the population by keeping the Vali out of the province for the time being and sending a Lieutenant-Governor in his place. Musurus Pasha himself understood this document to be a distinct refusal of a mixed occupation.³⁹ Consequently, Lord Salisbury instructed Mr. Malet to cease for the present moment from urging the Porte and strongly to advise the Sultan and the Grand Vizier to prepare sufficient Ottoman forces to occupy at least Burgas and Ihtiman.⁴⁰ Britain clarified that it had not entirely withdrawn its recommendation for a mixed occupation but they were attempting "to find means of obviating, or at least postponing, the necessity" of it.⁴¹

On the 7th of April, it became evident that the Ottoman Empire would be unable to occupy Burgas and Ihtiman. Meanwhile, the plan for a mixed occupation was completely abandoned by both Britain and Russia due to numerous difficulties in finalizing the details.⁴² Russian amendments of the proposal in a sense of separate occupation of different parts of the province, as for herself it preserved Burgas and the mountains near it, "horrificed" British Cabinet.⁴³ This would entail to partition of the province and subsequent division of the sphere of influence.

On the 9th of April, Lord Salisbury reported to the Queen's private secretary Sir H. Ponsonby, that Britain gave up on the idea of the mixed occupation. The Great Powers were divided in their opinion on the issue, each influenced by their strategic

interests in the region – France refused to participate, Germany worked against the idea, Italy would join only if all the Powers agreed, while the Russians and the Turks rejected the participation of the other. This left only Austria and England. The British authorities estimated that carrying out the occupation unilaterally would cost more than Britain could afford and would be dangerous, especially given the strong resistance from the local population.⁴⁴ Moreover, without a united action from all the Powers, the desired “moral effect” – influencing and tranquilizing the population – would not be achieved.⁴⁵ It was obvious that Britain could not risk a further intervention in the region, particularly when the Egyptian question on the agenda appeared, which posed considerable anxieties and threats to British interests. However, Lord Salisbury stated that the British Government remained committed to its pledge to assist the Sultan in ensuring that the Russian troops evacuated Eastern Rumelia if this had not already occurred by the agreed-upon deadline. He emphasized that the Sultan had to rely on his own resources to suppress any rebellion by his subjects unless there was clear evidence that they were being supported by a foreign power.⁴⁶

Conclusion

By establishing Eastern Rumelia as a buffer, Lord Salisbury was protecting British interests in the Balkans and preventing the Ottoman Empire from becoming overly dependent on Russia. However, the Ottoman Empire’s failure to restore its political and military authority by fulfilling its obligations according to Articles XV and XVI of the Treaty of Berlin created a situation that threatened to ignite another crisis in the Balkans with unpredictable consequences. In this regard, the mixed occupation plan of Eastern Rumelia, discussed between December 1878 and April 1879, was not merely an arbitrary diplomatic proposal but it was actually a calculated political measure required by the complex political situation in the province and it was often used as a tool to exert pressure and gain further concessions from both Britain and Russia.

Britain avoided being drawn into a direct intervention in Eastern Rumelia, a region that was not within its direct sphere of interest. Therefore, when the Great Powers gradually withdrew their support for this measure and the mixed occupation threatened to become a solo occupation, requiring Britain to occupy half of the territory, it reverted to the provisions of the Berlin Treaty. Besides this, another reason for Britain to step back from the joint occupation was the threat of the Ottoman Empire falling into Russia’s hands. At that time, intelligence reached Foreign Office about hidden understandings between Russia and the Ottoman Empire. Lord Salisbury supposed that the price Russia was ready to pay for an agreement with the Sultan included “a promise to keep Eastern Rumelia quiet (which is cheap, as it was already been given to us) and a promise to support Turkey against the claims of Greece”.⁴⁷

Eastern Rumelia was as important to the British authorities only insofar as it served as a barrier against the Russian expansion towards the Straits, under Ottoman control, with the presence of the Ottoman troops in the province. As a result, Britain pressured the Ottoman authorities to assert their right as a means to achieve its strategic goal.

NOTES

1. NRA Gascoyne-Cecil, A 20, Lord Salisbury to the Queen, May 6, 1878, no. 22, pp. 66 – 68.
2. TNA, F.O. 93/81/47, Memorandum communicated to the Marquis of Salisbury by Count Schouvaloff, May 23, 1878, pp. 41 – 42.
3. NRA Gascoyne-Cecil, A 20, Lord Salisbury to the Queen May 24, 1878, no. 32, pp. 88 – 90.
4. TNA, F.O. 881/3910, from Sir H. Drummond Wolff to Marquis of Salisbury, Philippopolis, December 31, 1878, no. 265, p. 203, no. 265.
5. TNA, F.O. 195/1214, from Marquis of Salisbury to Sir H. Drummond Wolff, Foreign Office, December 24, 1878, No 4.
6. TNA, F.O. 881/3910, from Sir A. H. Layard to Marquis of Salisbury, Pera, December 30, 1878, no. 168, pp. 134 – 136.
7. TNA, F.O. 881/3910, from Sir A. H. Layard to Marquis of Salisbury, Constantinople, December 23, 1878, no. 57, pp. 53 – 54.
8. TNA, F.O. 901/9, from Marquis of Salisbury to Sir H. Drummond Wolff, Foreign Office, December 31, 1878, no. 190.
9. TNA, F.O. 881/3910, from Marquis of Salisbury to Sir Henry Elliot, Foreign Office, January 6, 1879, no. 106, p. 87.
10. TNA, F.O. 181/579, from Marguis of Salisbury to Sir A. Paget, Foreign Office, January 8, 1879, no. 1.
11. F.O. 195/1214, from Lord Odo Russell, January 8, 1879, no. 10.
12. TNA, F.O. 181/579, from Marguis of Salisbury to Sir A. Paget, Foreign Office, January 8, 1879, no. 1.
13. NRA Gascoyne-Cecil, A34, Lord Salisbury to Sir H. D. Wolff, January 8, no. 19, p. 65 – 68.
14. TNA, F.O. 195/1215, from Marquis of Salisbury to Sir A. H. Layard, Foreign Office, February 1, 1879, no. 18.
15. TNA, F.O. 181/580, from the Marquis of Salisbury to Lord Loftus, Foreign Office, January 26, 1879, no. 62.
16. Times, 12 March, 1879, p. 7.
17. TNA, F.O. 901/11, from Marquis of Salisbury to Lord Dufferin, Foreign Office, February 27, 1879, (no 12).

18. NRA Gascoyne-Cecil, A 34, Lord Salisbury to Sir H.D. Wolff, February 27, 1878, no. 31, pp. 96 – 98.
19. Ibid.
20. TNA, F.O. 65/1038, from Marquis of Salisbury to Lord Dufferin, FO, March 8, 1879.
21. NRA 9226 Gascoyne-Cecil, A 34, Telegram from Lord Salisbury to Sir. H. D. Wolff, March 6, 1879, no. 32, pp. 100 – 102.
22. TNA, F.O. 65/1042, from Lord Dufferin to Marquis of Salisbury, St. Petersburg, March 12, 1879, no. 12.
34. TNA, F.O. 65/1042, from Lord Dufferin to Marquis of Salisbury, St. Petersburg, March 12, 1879, no. 11.
35. TNA, F.O. 65/1042, from Lord Dufferin to Marquis of Salisbury, St. Petersburg, March 15, 1879, no. 22.
36. TNA, F.O. 65/1042, from Lord Dufferin to Marquis of Salisbury, St. Petersburg, March 19, 1879, no. 30.
37. Times, March 25, 1879, p. 9
38. TNA, F.O. 65/1042, from Lord Dufferin to Marquis of Salisbury, St. Petersburg, March 19, 1879, no. 32.
39. TNA, F.O. 881/3940, from Mr. Malet to Marquis of Salisbury, Constantinople, April 2, 1879, no. 89, p. 80.
40. TNA, F.O. 881/3940, from Marquis of Salisbury to Lord Dufferin, Foreign Office, April 4, 1879, no. 129, p. 94.
41. TNA, F.O. 881/3940, from Marquis of Salisbury to Mr. Malet, Foreign Office, April 2, 1879, No 98, p. 83/ TNA, F.O. 195/1217, from Marquis of Salisbury to Mr. Malet, Foreign Office, April 2, 1879, no. 458.
42. TNA, F.O. 881/3940, from Marquis of Salisbury to Mr. Malet, Foreign Office, April 3, 1879, 11.15 p.m., no. 114, p. 90.
43. TNA, F.O. 881/3940, from Mr. Malet to Marquis of Salisbury, Constantinople, April 7, 1879, no. 221*, p. 178.
44. NRA Gascoyne-Cecil, A 31, Telegram from Salisbury to Earl of Dufferin, April 2, 1879, No 13, pp. 38-40.
45. NRA Gascoyne-Cecil, A 20, Telegram from Salisbury to Sir H. Ponsonby, April 9, 1879, no. 88, pp. 221 – 222.
46. NRA Gascoyne-Cecil A 20, Telegram from Salisbury to the Queen, April 10, 1879, no. 89, pp. 223 – 225.
47. TNA, F.O. 881/3940, from Marquis of Salisbury to Mr. Malet, Foreign Office, April 10, 1879, no. 272, p. 199.
48. NRA Gascoyne-Cecil A 27, Telegram from Lord Salisbury to Lord Odo Russell, April 20, 1879, no. 20, pp. 65 – 67.

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