

Balkan Federation and Bulgaria's liberation movement of the 19th century

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Nowadays the project for Balkan Federation seems to have been forgotten. Few people still talk of it, and for most of them, it is connected to certain efforts by socialist governments from the region in the 20th century to form one unified federal state. But historically and politically there once were much more nuances to the idea of Balkan Federation. It is a concept that could have helped the people from the region to avoid decades of bloodshed, militarism, rising chauvinism, nationalism, and generalized xenophobia etc. In another region, not far from the Balkans – the Middle East – the Kurdish liberation movement has been building a stateless democratic federation, based on a political project they call Democratic Confederalism¹. Through it an attempt is being made at nourishing the numerous cultures and traditions in the area, in opposition to the quarelling nation-states that promote national and religious homogenization.

Federalism has deep roots in radical democratic theory as a path towards peaceful coexistence between diverse peoples. Philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau found that the federal system of government was *the only one which combine[d] the advantages of large and small states – as essential to correct the radical vice of modern states; their sheer size*². But for him it could not be used in an authoritarian setting where people are fighting to cement their grip on power: *all observations of kings, or those who perform their roles, reveal that they are driven by two things, and two things only, to increase power externally and to strengthen their power internally*³, indirectly suggesting that it requires increased decentralization of power.

In the pages of Rousseau’s magnum opus, “The Social Contract”, one can distill one of the core principles of federalism – that of deputation: *Sovereignty cannot be represented for the same reason that it cannot be alienated; It consists essentially in the general will, and will cannot be represented: it is the same or it is different; there is no medium. The deputies of the people, therefore, are not and cannot be its representative: they are merely its commissioners, and can conclude nothing definitely. Every law which the people in person have not ratified is invalid – it is not a law.*⁴

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, later on, in his “The Federalist Principle” (1863) defends federalism as the best way to retain individual freedom within ‘natural’ communities such as families and guilds who enter pacts among themselves for necessary and specific purposes.⁵ He envisions it as the only guarantee for order, justice, stability and peace, giving *to each its fair measure, true jurisdiction and all its initiative*⁶.

Michael Bakunin was also a vocal supporter of the federalist idea. He believed, much like Rousseau, that confederations of monarchies or centralized states are a mockery⁷. For Bakunin federalism recognizes *the absolute right of each nation, great or small, of each people, weak or strong, of each province, of each commune, to complete autonomy, provided its internal constitution is not a threat or a danger to the autonomy and liberty of neighboring countries*⁸. Thus, he was

¹ Abdullah Ocalan: *War and Peace in Kurdistan: Perspectives for a political solution of the Kurdish question* (Cologne: International Initiative, 2009).

² Qvortrup: *The Political Philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The impossibility of reason* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p90.

³ Qvortrup: *The Political Philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The impossibility of reason* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p91.

⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *The Social Contract* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1998), p96.

⁵ plato.stanford.edu

⁶ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: *The Principle of Federation and the Need to Reconstitute the Party of Revolution* (The Anarchist Library, 2018), p131.

⁷ www.marxists.org

⁸ www.marxists.org

convinced that *there is but one way to bring about the triumph of liberty, of justice, and of peace in Europe* and that is the formation of a federalist structure called United States of Europe⁹.

Bakunin, along with other Russian radicals, was particularly interested in the struggles of Slavic people. In his “The Appeal to the Slavs” he even suggests that they should adopt the creation of a *Universal Federation of European Republics*¹⁰. As part of this interest, Bakunin was in contact with Bulgarian revolutionaries, who at that time were fighting against the rule of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans. The first known contact of him with Bulgaria’s liberation movement is in April, 1869¹¹. Two delegates of the organization “Mlada Bulgaria” (Young Bulgaria) – Theofil Raynov and Raycho Grablev – arrive in Geneva for a meeting with Bakunin and Nechayev. During the same year, Bakunin will even write a draft program of the Bulgarian revolution.¹²

The federalist ideal is clearly present in the Bulgaria’s liberation movement that fought the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. Some of its most prominent figures express it in words and in practice. Certain tendencies among it embrace the project for Balkan Federation as a way for lasting peace and human freedom to be established in the peninsula, as they target the very political structure of the Ottoman Empire, and not ethnic groups, as expressed in the following passage in a proclamation of the Bulgarian Central Revolutionary Committee:

*You mustn’t be at all fierce against the peaceful Turks, with whom we share habitat and sufferings. On the contrary, we are obliged to offer them fraternal hand, help and protection, if they are being prosecuted by the government, as they were sympathetic to our people’s movement. The honor, property and life of the peaceful Turks must be for us as dear and holy as they are for them.*¹³

Let us examine further this internationalist Balkan project as envisioned by some of the most prominent figures of the Bulgaria’s liberation movement of the 19th century.

Georgi Stoykov Rakovski (1821–1867)

[O]ur foundation is to always honour and respect all ethnicities and to search unity with them, when they are honest and just.
~Rakovski¹⁴

Georgi Stoykov Rakovski, also known as Georgi Sava Rakovski, is considered as one of the forefathers of the Bulgarian liberation movement, as well as of the idea of Balkan unity. Son of a wealthy merchant, Rakovski receives a very good education for his time. He begins his studies in his home town Kotel, and later moves to Istanbul to continue studying. There he meets and gets involved with the local Bulgarian intelligentsia.

⁹ www.marxists.org

¹⁰ theanarchistlibrary.org

¹¹ www.anarchy.bg

¹² Georgi Hadjiev: *Националното освобождение и безвластният федерализъм* [National Liberation and Anti-authoritarian Federalism] (Sofia: ArtIzdat, 1992), p15.

¹³ Khristo Kabakchiev: *Българските революционери за балканската федерация* [Bulgarian Revolutionaries on the Balkan Federation] (Sofia: Party Socialist Library and Press, 1915), p31.

¹⁴ Khristo Kabakchiev: *Българските революционери за балканската федерация* [Bulgarian Revolutionaries on the Balkan Federation] (Sofia: Party Socialist Library and Press, 1915), p19.

In the period 1841–43 he moves to Braila (Romania), where he works as a teacher of Greek and French. While there, Rakovski takes part in the second Braila revolt (part of three rebellions). These events are an initial effort at practical Balkan solidarity, as in them Bulgarians, Greeks, Serbs and other ethnicities organize together guerilla groups, who strive at entering Othomann territories, in order to liberate the people there from the authority of the Sultan. The revolt is unsuccessful, as the Romanian forces block the passage for the guerillas. Rakovski is arrested and sentenced to death, but he manages to escape to Marseille (France), thanks to the Greek citizenship he has managed to obtain while in Braila.

His participation in the Braila revolts is not his first interaction with Balkan solidarity. In 1841, Rakovski travels two times to Athens (Greece) to meet local revolutionaries. It is these connections that most probably help him obtain a Greek citizenship.

After Braila, Rakovski returns to his home town of Kotel, where he takes an active part in the struggle of the local guilds (*esnafi*) against the rich (*chorbadzyi*). Because of his activity he is being arrested by the Ottoman authorities and sent to Istanbul, where he remains imprisoned from 1845 until 1848. After this period, Rakovski returns to Bulgaria where he continues his revolutionary activity.

In 1853, with the beginning of the Crimean War, Rakovski establishes a Secret Society, which is supposed to gather intelligence about the Ottoman military and send it to Russia.

Historians suggest that Rakovski's idea for the need of Balkan unity for the liberation of the region was influenced by French economist Jérôme-Adolphe Blanqui. In his personal archive there is a reference to the latter's "Travels in Bulgaria" (1841).¹⁵ There are no proofs that the two men have ever met in person, but Blanqui's book, according to the historian Shishmanov, has influenced Rakovski's ideas about Balkan solidarity.

After the crush of the Niš rebellion in 1841 Blanqui was tasked by the French government to travel to Bulgaria and reflect on the events. As a result of his trip he wrote "Travels in Bulgaria, 1841" – a political travel notes, in which the author describes the harsh situation of the Christian population of the Balkans during the time of the disintegrating Ottoman Empire.

In the autumn of 1858 there is a new Montenegrin-Ottoman confloct. Under these conditions Rakovski draws his first "plan for the liberation of Bulgaria", in which he connects tightly the liberation of the country with that of all of the Balkans. He writes: *Imagine if now that Montenegro, Herzegovina and Bosnia are on foot, Bulgaria also arise, which to be followed by Serbia and the free Greece, with armed groups in Thessaly, Epirus and Macedonia, how this will disturb the Turk: this will be his downfall and chasing out of Europe!*¹⁶ The seeds of the project for Balkan Federation in Rakovski's plan are evident from the absence of any doubt in the solidarity between the peoples in the region. Simultaneously he steadily loses his hope for help from the West or the Russian empire. He becomes convinced that the only way for Balkan liberation is through by the local peoples themselves and their cooperation.

In 1860 Rakovski moves to Belgrade, Serbia, where he publishes newspaper and books. Here he composes a plan for the liberation of Bulgaria and a "statute for temporary Bulgarian leadership in Belgrade", and also prepares an armed group. When on 3 of June 1862 a conflict is about to erupt between Serbia and the Ottoman Empire, with Rakovski and his men ready to join. But as the clash is finally avoided, the group is forced to disperse.

¹⁵ balkansunited.wordpress.com

¹⁶ balkansunited.wordpress.com

Rakovski continues to his efforts at planting the seeds of a Balkan Federation as in 1863 he visits Athens, Chetina and Bucharest, meeting statesmen and leading public figures. He also begins publishing the newspaper “Budushtnost” (Futuresness), which is in both Bulgarian and Romanian as an effort to bring both peoples closer together. Until the end of his life Rakovski continues his publishing activity. He dies from tuberculosis near Bukarest.

Rakovski nowhere in his works directly mentions the Balkan Federation. What he envisioned is more of a Balkan military union. But his insistence on the importance on practical solidarity between the people in the region most certainly planted the seed of the federative idea in the Bulgarian liberation movement. The English feminist author Georgina Muir Mackenzie, which met Rakovski in the spring of 1863 in Athens, wrote that the ideas of the latter were not narrowly national since his revolutionary ideals were not confined within one nation but spread over the whole of the Balkan region.¹⁷

Lyuben Karavelov (1834–1879)

The Bulgarian revolution must be revolution of the whole Balkan peninsula.
~Newspaper “Nezavisimost” vol.17, 1874¹⁸

Lyuben Karavelov, a renowned scholar and revolutionary, was among the first and most fervent advocates of the idea for Balkan Federation in Bulgaria. He is the first among the Bulgarian revolutionaries to clearly articulate the importance of the federative principle for the struggle of the people in the region, consistently defending it and agitating for it. But this idea will also lead to many from the Bulgarian national liberation movement to accuse him of serving foreign political interests.

Born in the city of Koprivshitsa, Karavelov travels within the borders of the Ottoman empire, where he receives his initial education from Bulgarian and Greek schools. In 1857 he moves to Moscow to pursue higher education in history and philosophy. There he takes part in the student uprisings in 1861.¹⁹

In Moscow Karavelov is personally acquainted with “the father of Russian socialism” Alexander Herzen, utopian socialist Nikolay Chernyshevski, nihilist Nikolay Dobrolyubov, socialist slavophile Ivan Aksakov and pan-slavist Mikhail Pogodin.²⁰ It is this heavily politicized environment that shapes the political views of the Bulgarian revolutionary. The ideals of universal equality and internationalism will plant the seeds of the federalist idea in the thought of Karavelov.

In 1867 he moves to Belgrade where he works as a correspondent for Russian newspapers. There Karavelov establishes contacts with Serbian socialists led by *the first Balkan socialist of European stature*²¹ Svetozar Marković, because of which he is forced by the authorities to move to Austria-Hungary.

¹⁷ balkansunited.wordpress.com

¹⁸ Khristo Kabakchiev: *Българските революционери за балканската федерация* [Bulgarian Revolutionaries on the Balkan Federation] (Sofia: Party Socialist Library and Press, 1915), p30.

¹⁹ dbpedia.org

²⁰ Charles A. Moser: *A History of Bulgarian Literature 865–1944* (Paris: Mouton, 1972), p70.

²¹ McClellan, Woodford D.: “The Problem and the Setting” In *Svetozar Markovic and the Origins of Balkan Socialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), pp3-28.

In 1869 Karavelov settles in Bucharest where he establishes connection with the Bulgarian Scholarly Society (the future Bulgarian Academy of Sciences). It is in this city where Karavelov starts publishing his first newspaper “Svoboda” (Freedom) (1869–1873), in the pages of which many articles are dedicated to the project of Balkan Federation. One of many examples can be found in issue 16 (1870) of the newspaper where the principle of federalism is advanced as the true guarant of independence:

*We Bulgarians, Serbians, and Romanians (and the Greeks too, if they abandon their crazy dreams of the rusty Byzantine empire) aim at the same target, share the same destiny, driven by one idea, and for this reason we have to create one free Danube federation and protect our people and our personal freedom. [...] We have to, as soon as possible, determine our road and write program for our new life, because if we quarrel with each other instead, it will be only too easy to fall under some new yoke, and then we will never be able to resurrect.*²²

This belief in the potential of Balkan unity to achieve independence for the people from the region without the help of foreign force is evident throughout the pages of “Svoboda”, like this quote from the newspaper’s issue from October 7th (1872):

*We have to achieve our independence on our own, without the help and support of no one, and if we are met with compassion by another country we will be too grateful – but nothing more. Serbia, Romania, Montenegro, Bulgaria and Greece can improve their situation on their own, without the European tutorism.*²³

The newspaper clearly expresses internationalist ideas and shows the limitations of nationalism: in issue 11 (1873), an article suggests that *the Simeonean kingdoms, the Dusanian state, the Byzantine empires does not guarantee for the wellbeing of both Greeks and southern Slav tribes but instead 11 million southern Slavs, 6 million Romanians, and 2 million Greeks can ensure their own future via the moral strength, which is called Danube federation.*²⁴

In the newspaper Karavelov works with Hristo Botev, considered by many “forefather of Bulgarian anarchism”. In Bucharest the former is also elected chairmen of the Bulgarian Revolutionary Central Committee, where he works with another significant figure of the Bulgarian liberation movement and vocal advocate for democratic republic – Vasil Levski. Karavelov shares with both Botev and Levski the idea of Balkan Federation.

In 1870 Karavelov makes a visit to legendary Russian anarchist Michael Bakunin at Locarno, Switzerland.²⁵ The former, it is suspected, does not organize this meeting because of any particular interest in the ideology of anarchism, but to learn about the types of grassroots and conspiratorial organizing, with which the anarchist movement is experienced.²⁶ It is approximately in

²² Khristo Kabakchiev: *Българските революционери за балканската федерация* [Bulgarian Revolutionaries on the Balkan Federation] (Sofia: Party Socialist Library and Press, 1915), p25.

²³ Khristo Kabakchiev: *Българските революционери за балканската федерация* [Bulgarian Revolutionaries on the Balkan Federation] (Sofia: Party Socialist Library and Press, 1915), p23.

²⁴ Khristo Kabakchiev: *Българските революционери за балканската федерация* [Bulgarian Revolutionaries on the Balkan Federation] (Sofia: Party Socialist Library and Press, 1915), p27.

²⁵ E. H. Carr: *Michael Bakunin* (London: Macmillan Press, 1975), p448.

²⁶ litternet.bg

this period that Karavelov is in contact with another prominent Russian radical – nihilist Sergey Nechayev. The Bulgarian revolutionary, it is suspected, helps the latter obtain travel documents with which to reach Moscow.²⁷

In the period 1873–74 Karavelov publishes another newspaper – “Nezavisimost” (Independence), in which Botev is an active contributor. In the pages of this publication the idea for Balkan Federation is further developed. It becomes more evident that Karavelov imagines one such federalist project along the framework of Switzerland and the United States:

*Between the Slavic tribes a brotherly love and genuine trust can be established when each one of them is free, independent and self-governed. Only the complete freedom (as in America and Switzerland) is capable to abolish the historic, national and tribal differences.*²⁸

Especially the federalist model of Switzerland is being presented as a suitable political project to unite an ethnically-diverse region like the Balkans:

*If our southern-Slavic federation is based on freedom and equality, then no Slavic tribe should fear for its tribal differentiation and its individual specificity. We will repeat for the thousand time, that in Switzerland are living three completely opposite to each other ethnicities and between them there is no tribal violence.*²⁹

During the mid-'70 Karavelov begins to lose his revolutionary zeal, following the 1873 capture and execution of his comrade Vasil Levski by the Ottoman authorities. In 1875 he is also excluded from the Bulgarian Revolutionary Central Committee. Karavelov's gradual retreat from his previous revolutionary positions attracts the criticism of Botev. From 1875 he begins publishing the journal “Znanie” (Knowledge), authors several popular science books, and writes for Russian newspapers. He helps establish the committee “Edinstvo” (Oneness), which aims at helping the revolutionary movement in Macedonia and Thrace, and participates in organizing the Kresna–Razlog uprising from October 1878. Karavelov dies from tuberculosis in January 21st, 1879 in the Danube city of Rouse.

Vasil Levski (1837–1873)

We're not driving away the Turkish people nor their faith, but the Sultan and his laws.
~Vasil Levski³⁰

Vasil “Levski” Kunchev was born in the town of Karlovo, to a middle-class family. In the early years of his life he becomes an Orthodox monk, after which takes part in the two Bulgarian legias (military groups formed by Bulgarian volunteers in the Serbian capital of Belgrade in the second

²⁷ Woodford McClellan: “Nechaevschina (The Nechaev Affair),” in *Revolutionary Exiles: The Russians in the First International and the Paris Commune* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1979).

²⁸ Khristo Kabakchiev: *Българските революционери за балканската федерация* [Bulgarian Revolutionaries on the Balkan Federation] (Sofia: Party Socialist Library and Press, 1915), p29.

²⁹ Khristo Kabakchiev: *Българските революционери за балканската федерация* [Bulgarian Revolutionaries on the Balkan Federation] (Sofia: Party Socialist Library and Press, 1915), p29.

³⁰ web.archive.org

part of the 19th century), first of which led by the profederalist Rakovski. Abroad Kunchev will acquire the nickname “Levski” (Lionlike). Between the two legions he will work as teacher in Bulgaria.

In 1869 in the Romanian capital Bucharest, Levski, together with other revolutionaries among whom Karavelov, will establish the Bulgarian Revolutionary Central Committee (BRCC). But the former will disagree with most of his comrades over the strategy the Bulgarian revolutionary movement should follow and departs from Romania in the spring of 1870. Levski is disillusioned with the idea of preparing guerilla armies abroad, which to enter Ottoman territories and liberate the local populations. Instead he insists that these populations should organize themselves and form revolutionary network, which to prepare the ground for a popular revolt, which to liberate them from the grip of the empire.

After he returns permanently to Bulgaria, Levski begins establishing a wide network of secret committees in Bulgarian cities and villages, called Internal Revolutionary Organization (IRO). Its target is to operate in conspiratorial manner and provoke a popular uprising inside the country. From then on, Levski envisions the establishment of a secular people’s republic.

Nowhere in the known writings of Levski there is direct mentioning of Balkan Federation. But as he has collaborated with Rakovski, Karavelov and Botev, there surely are certain federalist influences upon his political views. More specifically, in “Ordinance of the workers for the liberation of the Bulgarian people”, written mainly by Levski in 1871, the goal set is the proclamation of *the people’s freedom and the Balkan Republic*³¹. The use of the last two terms indicates the drive of the author(s) towards the establishment of a wider regional union. This becomes even more evident, when one inspects how Levski envisions the revolution – as a common effort of all Balkan people – and the republic – as a form of people’s government:

*With one common revolution to radically transform the current statist despotic-tyrannical system and replace it with a democratic republic (people’s government). In the very same place, which our forefathers redeemed with the power of their arms and their blood, in which Turkish soldiers and janissaries are raging inhumanely today, and in which the right of force reigns, a temple of truth and true freedom is to be erected. [...] Bulgarians, Turks, Jews, etc. will be equal in every respect: either in religion, nationality, civic relations, or in any other aspect. All will live under one common law, decided with majority by all ethnicities.*³²

Levski is clear that what he envisions differs significantly from what already exists in the region, when claiming that *by God’s will we shall destroy the rotten and cowardly State, so that we can create another new and more lasting structure*³³. This new structure refuses absolutisms of any sort, based instead on universal human equality: *If we fight with the Turks in order to have a Tsar, then we are fools. And now we have a Sultan. We need no master, but freedom and human equality*³⁴. He also underlines the desacralised character of his envisioned project (transcending

³¹ Vasil Levski: *Нарѣда (проектоустав) на работниците за освобождението на българския наорд* [Order (draft) of the Workers for the Liberation of the Bulgarian people] (1871).

³² Vasil Levski: *Нарѣда (проектоустав) на работниците за освобождението на българския наорд* [Order (draft) of the Workers for the Liberation of the Bulgarian people] (1871).

³³ otkrovenia.com

³⁴ www.slovo.bg

calls for Balkan unity on the basis of the Christian religion³⁵) by claiming that the liberation movement should seek *brotherhood with everyone, regardless of religion or ethnicity*³⁶.

Levski's idea for common struggle of all Balkan people under the republican banner is evident from a letter to Karavelov from 1870, which was published on the beginning of the next year in the newspaper "Svoboda". There is a passage in it that reveals this internationalist spirit: *There will be one flag, on which will be written: "Sacred and Pure Republic". And we wish the same to our brothers the Serbs, the Montenegrins, the Romanians etc. to not remain behind us [and] in one and the same time give their voice.*³⁷

On 22 September 1872, without an approval from Levski or the rest of the leadership of the IRO, members of the organization rob an Ottoman Postal Convoy.³⁸ Although the robbery is initially successful, the robbers are soon arrested. After their confessions follows an investigation by the Ottoman authorities that discovers the size and members of IRO and Levski's leading role. The latter, realizes the danger and prepares to escape to Romania, where he is to meet with Karavelov. On 27 December 1872 Levski is arrested while still in Bulgaria and hanged on 18 February 1873.

Levski will leave a legacy of deep belief in the power of popular rebellion without the patronage of foreign powers. And although he never used the term Balkan Federation, he expressed its ideals in his vision for a union between the Balkan people under the banner of desecralised and humanist republicanism. Probably similar, although not as clearly articulated, as the project envisioned by Karavelov.

Hristo Botev (1848–1876)

We speak of the situation of our people, regarding these small states that are preparing to be successors of Turkey but which the history calls to consist, on free democratic foundations, the desired and needed Dunabe federation.

~ Hristo Botev³⁹

Hristo Botev is born in an affluent family in the Bulgarian city of Kalofer. From a young age he begins learning the Russian language and reading books by Russian classicists and revolutionary democrats from his father's library. In 1863 Botev is accepted to study in the Second male gymnasium in the Russian city of Odessa. This is a period of political turmoil in the country after the defeat it has suffered in the Crimean War of 1853–56 and figures like utopian socialist Nikolay Chernyshevski, and nihilists like Nikolay Dobrolyubov and Dimitry Pisarev inspire popular resistance to the Tsarist regime. It was in this electrified environment that the political ideas of Botev are shaped. According to Georgi Smilov, a co-student of his, Botev's favorite books of this period are Chernyshevsky's "What is to be Done", Turgenev's "On the Eve", Pushkin's es-

³⁵ vostokian.com

³⁶ bg.wikisource.org

³⁷ www.eurochicago.com

³⁸ Crampton 2007, pp89–90.

³⁹ Khristo Kabakchiev: *Българските революционери за балканската федерация* [Bulgarian Revolutionaries on the Balkan Federation] (Sofia: Party Socialist Library and Press, 1915), p48.

says, and many other Russian progressives.⁴⁰ Botev himself, in his works references European libertarian thinkers like Proudhon and Fourier, signifying their influence upon his worldview.⁴¹

In the end of the 1860s and the beginning of the 1870s many Russian revolutionaries are forced to migrate to Romania due to ongoing political prosecutions. Botev also moves there, working as a Bulgarian language teacher in the city of Izmail in the period 1869–1871. Here he will establish connections with Russian radicals, among whom the nihilist Nechayev. Botev is strongly impressed from the latter and distributes himself Nechayev’s “Catechism of a Revolutionary”.⁴² Botev will establish also good friendship with socialist Nikolay Meledin, who at this time is hiding in Romania under the pseudonym Alexander Florescu.⁴³ These connections will further strengthen the utopian socialist ideas of the Bulgarian revolutionary.

It is in 1871 that Botev will begin publishing the newspaper “Duma na Bulgarskite Emigranti” (Word of the Bulgarian Immigrants). On the pages of it the revolutionary will passionately advocate about the project of Balkan Federation. A characteristic quote is the following one: *the southern-Slavic federation, which does not have the principle of slavery and merging of different peoples, but on the contrary – it is a guarantee for the free development of these peoples who will consist it*⁴⁴.

In 1872, because of his propaganda activity in the country Botev is arrested and spends couple of months in prison.⁴⁵ After he is released, he begins contributing to the newspapers issued by Lyuben Karavelov, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Simultaneously he will form a close friendship with another important figure – the Russian narodnik revolutionary Nikolai Sudzilovsky-Russel, with the latter being highly interested since the 1870s in the struggles of the Southern Slavs.

In the period 1874–75 Botev is in Romania, where he publishes another newspaper – “Zname” (Banner). Here he will further explore the project of Balkan Federation, but from much more libertarian perspective than the one advocated by Karavelov. In issue 14 the following claim is made, which clearly depicts Botev’s disdain for governments and class-based social organization:

*Only the reasonable and brotherly unity between the peoples is in condition to put an end to the tows, poverties and parasites of the human kind and only this union is capable of establishing true freedom, brotherhood, equality and happiness around the globe. As long as the peoples are being devided between each other by the machinacions of their empires... until then there will be no happiness on Earth, no clear day for the human. The governments and the privileged classes among all the people will continue crushing the poor, feeding of their labor, keeping them in ignorance...*⁴⁶

The publications in “Zname” (Banner) make it clear that the struggle of Botev is not simply against the Ottoman Empire, but against every form of oppression: A revolution which to clear

⁴⁰ Khristo Yonkov: “Руските приятели на Христо Ботев” [The Russian Friends of Botev] in *Nova Zora* vol.22, 3.VI.2008.

⁴¹ www.lintellettualeedissidente.it

⁴² www.pan.bg

⁴³ www.estelnegre.org

⁴⁴ Khristo Kabakchiev: *Българските революционери за балканската федерация* [Bulgarian Revolutionaries on the Balkan Federation] (Sofia: Party Socialist Library and Press, 1915), p44.

⁴⁵ homohomini.wordpress.com

⁴⁶ Khristo Kabakchiev: *Българските революционери за балканската федерация* [Bulgarian Revolutionaries on the Balkan Federation] (Sofia: Party Socialist Library and Press, 1915), pp.50–51.

the Balkan peninsula not only from the Turks, who consider us livestock, but also from all those who may harm our genuine drives for complete and absolute human freedom⁴⁷.

In issue 2 of the newspaper Botev will also publish his famous pamphlet “Ridiculous Weep” in defense of the Paris Commune. In it he will exhibit his ideas regarding the essence of revolution as the process of radically empowering human beings to directly take control of their lives: *Christianity has its martyrs, until it call them “sons of God”; the revolution also has them, in order to “turn the tramp into citizen”; socialism also has them and will forever have them, striving to turn the human into something more than son of God and citizen — not as an ideal, but as a human “from whom the destiny of his city depends, and not vice versa”*.⁴⁸

Simultaneously Botev is actively involved in the planning of the April Uprising, aimed at the liberation of Bulgarian lands from the Ottoman Empire. The Russian narodnik Sudzilovsky will also help his Bulgarian friend and his comrades in the preparations by getting them in touch with Russian anarcho-socialist groups from Europe. Botev will himself refer to this in a letter from 12 of April 1875, where he writes that:

*The Russian socialists in London and Zurich are inviting me to go to them and be their commissioner. They want to get in touch with our revolutionaries. They propose us to exchange proganda, passports etc. We are ready to help you morally and physically, i.e. with words and hands, writes me an old co-student of mine named Sudzilovsky. I responded to him that I agree to be their commissioner regarding literature, but for the rest I will have to wait the decision of our assembly. The assembly will take place after the celebrations in Tarnovo.*⁴⁹

In April 1876, Botev with an armed guerilla company crosses the Dunabe river to join the uprising he and his comrades were preparing. As the rebels proceed inland, they gradually realise that, despite previous enthusiastic messages from the local apostles, the population in the area has not risen. Furthermore, due to the violent suppression of the uprisings preceding elsewhere in the Bulgarian-populated territories, the entire Ottoman military machine was mobilised and thickly patrolling the area. Botev and his guerillas decide to press on and try to rouse the local populations on their way. But the communities, intimidated by the overwhelming Ottoman military presence, refuse to be incited into any overt sign of rebellion. The armed company almost immediately will attract the attention of the Ottoman authorities. After series of clashes, on 1 of June Botev himself is killed, with almost all of the guerillas being either murdered or imprisoned.

Although Botev doesn't manage to provoke a mass popular uprising against the Ottoman Empire, his legacy will live on, maintaining the spirit of libertarian Balkan federalism among Bulgarian radicals even until this very day.

The Project of Balkan Federation after the Berlin Treaty

In the aftermath of the Treaty of Berlin (1878) that follows the Russian victory over the Ottoman Empire, with which the major powers restructure the map of the Balkan region, the

⁴⁷ Khristo Kabakchiev: *Българските революционери за балканската федерация* [Bulgarian Revolutionaries on the Balkan Federation] (Sofia: Party Socialist Library and Press, 1915), p53.

⁴⁸ libcom.org

⁴⁹ Dimitar Ivanov: *Стефан Стамболов: От Перото до Ятагана* [Stefan Stambolov: From the Feather to the Yatagan] (Sofia: Trud, 2005), p51.

idea of a Balkan Federation still attracts Bulgarian revolutionaries. After these events, in 1885 in the city of Plovdiv (Bulgaria) is created the Bulgarian Secret Central Revolutionary Committee (BSCRC) (an organization that will play important role in the unification of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia⁵⁰), whose immediate goal is for the Macedonian region (at this time still within the borders of the Ottoman Empire) to gain autonomy, but in perspective they seek the creation of a Balkan Federation. This latter target is clearly stated in their program in the following manner:

*The committee will strictly adhere to that the Bulgarian people must live together with all neighbors on the Balkan peninsula and to desire to establish with them one federation of free lands, because only in this case external pressure can be resisted and real freedom established.*⁵¹

It is clear that the BSCRC continues the strand of anti-imperialist internationalism advocated by their predecessors, according to which the liberation of each Balkan community is inseparable from the liberation of the neighboring ones and the main guarantee for lasting freedom in the region is the establishment of federal network, based on equality and solidarity. In this sense they adhere to the legacy of the BRCC and the progressive republican ideals of its most prominent figures – Karavelov and Levski. But there are indications that the BSCRC' federalist aspirations are, at least partially, influenced by the utopian socialist ideas of Botev, such as their first public action being the organization of a demonstration on May 19th 1885, in commemoration of the death of the latter.

A practical example of Balkan federalism will be exhibited in 1903, through the experience of the Strandzha Commune – a short-lived anarchist commune, proclaimed in Strandzha mountain (located in today's southeastern Bulgaria and the European part of Turkey.) during the Ilinden-Preobrazhenie Uprising. During its brief existence power was radically redistributed among the grassroots, allowing people to directly participate via local assemblies and councils in the management of their communities.⁵² In the midst of this revolutionary moment the spirit of Balkan fraternity is once again exhibited, as the rebels (predominantly Bulgarians) issue an appeal in the language of the local Greek minority, reassuring them that their goal is not the re-establishment of a Bulgarian kingdom, but a fight for universal human rights, thus calling them to join the commune.⁵³ And although the Ottoman armed forces put an end to the Strandzha Commune the same year, the latter manifest in practice the vision of a future that don't belong to kingdoms and nation-states, but to free democratic municipalities, connected through transnational federal structures.

The Legacy of the Project of Balkan Federation Today

Unfortunately, nowadays the idea of Balkan Federation, based on universal equality, has long been abandoned in Bulgaria. On the contrary, there is certain hostility towards it as it has been presented repeatedly by the mainstream as a snide project for the domination of the region by one Nation-State over the rest. This is because after the Second World War the idea for a Balkan

⁵⁰ Ivan Andonov: *Съединението* [The Unification] (Пловдив, 1929), pp33-36.

⁵¹ saedinenieto.bg

⁵² theanarchistlibrary.org

⁵³ theanarchistlibrary.org

Federation is overtaken by some of the Communist Parties on the peninsula and it is viewed as a potential tool for each one of them to expand their influence over the region.

The project with its internationalist, anti-imperialist and, often utopian socialist characteristics, advanced by the 19th century Bulgarian revolutionaries, is abandoned and replaced by nationalist approaches that focuses on power antagonisms between regional countries.

The idea for broad Balkan unity based on equality and solidarity today exists in the margins of society, mostly among groups and tendencies that adhere to radical democratic, anarchist or utopian ideals. And although the situation in the region might currently look quite grim, with rampant nationalisms and xenophobia, there are still seeds of Balkan federalism that require persistence and coherent political action.

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