

The Balkan Committee.

President—Professor WESTLAKE, K.C.,

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F.R.S., F.S.A.
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10, ADELPHI TERRACE,

STRAND, W.C.

MACEDONIA IN THE WINTER OF 1907-8.

Mr. C. F. G. MASTERMAN, M.P., Mr. NOEL BUXTON, Chairman of the Balkan Committee, and Mr. CHARLES RODEN BUXTON, having just returned from a tour in the interior of Macedonia, have issued for the use of members of the Committee the following notes on the present situation as it appeared to them:—

Official utterances have created an impression that considerable progress has been made in the administration of the government of Macedonia, and in the establishment of public security, and we began our journey convinced that comparatively little fault was now to be found with the conduct of the Turkish troops, the gendarmerie, the village guards, the tax-gatherers and the landlords. It was a very welcome relief to find ourselves almost persuaded to accept the theory that, were it not for the existence of revolutionary bands, the government of Macedonia would be sufficiently tolerable to bring revolutionary movements to an end. This impression, however, vanished very quickly when we left Salonica and saw things as they are in the country.

There is unquestionably an improvement, but it consists only in a diminution of the evil done by the agents of the Government themselves and, even so, is very incomplete. For instance—

- (1) The Gendarmerie are improved, but their proper business—the duty of arresting criminals—has been transferred to the troops.
- (2) The field-guards and tax-gatherers behave more regularly, but it is generally held that the presence of rebel bands is the main cause of their improvement.

- (3) With regard to tax-collecting and road-making, the Finance Commission has exerted quite a novel influence for good, but these things are of small value so long as life is insecure.
- (4) The troops themselves, under an Adjutant Major, lately attacked the village of Belitsa, drove out all the men, and spent forty-eight hours in pillage and rape.

Even if amelioration in these respects were complete, it must be remembered that the benefit is purely negative. In face of such a situation as exists, people are inclined to be satisfied with a very low standard. A diminution of injury actually committed by the Government itself appears as a great reform, and one is apt to forget that the primary function of every Government is to prevent crime. If progress is submitted to this obvious test there is no progress at all. In a single district there have been certified by the foreign officer in the first seven months of this year over 100 violent deaths. In the small district of Castoria in two years 466 murders have been recorded. It was very disappointing to find that murders committed by Mohammedans, so far from having ceased, in many districts still constitute the greater proportion, and none of us had realised that in the last four years the loss of life by violence had certainly exceeded 10,000 lives.

It is true that a vast number of murders are now committed by non-Mohammedans, but the failure of the Government to provide the slightest security is not on that account more consoling to the villager.

Another feature of to-day is the emigration of the peasants to America. The fact that some 30,000 have left the country is in itself an adequate test of the failure of the so-called reforms. Shipping agents and bankers have found the emigration business the most prosperous trade in Macedonia. The Government approves of emigration, because the most active men are thereby removed, and because additional security that the taxes will be paid is always obtained before a passport is given. Sufficient guarantee is obtained for payment by the rule that wives and families must be left behind. Emigrants commonly return in about three years and the Government gains in the end by the wealth which they bring back. Meanwhile the opportunity of levying baksheesh for the issue of permits makes the emigration movement sufficiently popular among the officials.

The beginnings of improved Government are actual enough to show that the policy of reform by a European Commission is well worth the utmost efforts. But one elementary defect vitiates the result of the hard work that has been devoted during the last four years to making bricks without straw. This defect is the total inability of the foreign officers to obtain the arrest of criminals. Imprisonment of the innocent, while sufficiently



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scandalous, might be quite harmless by comparison with the licence given to outrage of every kind which, in the short-sighted view of the Government, serves to maintain things as they are. A single instance will suffice. One of the foreign officers recently determined to make a test case of the licence granted to a notorious murderer and leader of Turkish "murder committees." He requested his gendarmerie captain to arrest the man, but the request was refused. He then declared his intention of arresting the man himself. On proceeding to do so, he found the man protected by the troops in a barrack and dressed up in soldier's clothes. The Turkish officer threatened to use force if the foreign officer attempted an arrest, and to this day the murderer remains at large, officially protected in his sanguinary work.

Thus judicial reform is useless if it amounts only to inspection. Without the power of arrest, and a corresponding control of armed forces, inspection will only at the best prevent wrongful imprisonment. It cannot effect the positive improvement which is required.

With regard to solution, two definite hopes are entertained in various quarters. One is that Russia, influenced by the *entente* with England, will lend her moral support to Bulgaria in what is always spoken of as "the war." The other—perhaps the most probable—is that fanatics among the revolutionaries, driven to desperation, will renew the attacks upon foreign property for which they risked their lives in 1903.

Over all there is a bitter disappointment that the help which England attempted to give appears to have been abandoned. At least, it is said, Lord Lansdowne *posait des idées et forçait à marcher*.

The following is the story of the dreadful outrages recently committed by Turkish troops at the village of Belitsa in the Vilayet of Monastir :—

In the afternoon two detachments composed of about 150 soldiers each reached Belitsa from Kirtchevo and Ochrida. The soldiers remained in the village more than forty-eight hours. During that time they assembled all the men of the village in one place, where they were kept under arrest by a party of soldiers, while the great majority of the troops broke into the houses, and, on the pretext of searching for supposed "komitajis," violated the unprotected women and young girls, and gave themselves up to every kind of violence and plunder, carrying off and eating everything that could be taken away or consumed. Thirteen women were violated, and several young girls suffered the same fate. In the case of one of the peasant men unspeakable outrages were committed by the troops. Six peasants, of whom one was aged ninety, another seventy-five, and a third seventy, were beaten almost to death. Robberies of articles of clothing, furniture, grain, and everything that could be removed, took place in twenty-five houses.

The names and ages of the women who suffered, of the men beaten, and also the names of those whose houses were robbed, and the extent of the robbery in each case, are in the possession of the Balkan Committee.

No punishment of any kind appears to have been inflicted on the troops for these outrages. They were commanded by an Adjutant-Major, a Lieutenant of Infantry, and accompanied by a Lieutenant of Gendarmerie.

RELIEF.

From several reliable sources in Macedonia appeals for help to relieve the sufferings caused by outrages have recently been received. For this purpose it is hoped that collections will be made where possible at meetings.

MEETINGS.

Meetings are being held in many places. Several members of the Committee who have lately returned from Macedonia are prepared to speak, supplying lantern slides if necessary.

Those supporters of the Committee who have not this year sent a subscription are urgently requested to do so.

