

66 | 1 (2026)

PRISPEVKI

ZA NOVEJŠO ZGODOVINO

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INŠTITUT ZA NOVEJŠO ZGODOVINO

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PRISPEVKI
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ZGODOVINO

Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino
Contributions to the Contemporary History
Contributions a l'histoire contemporaine
Beiträge zur Zeitgeschichte

UDC/UDK 94(497.4) "18/19 "
ISSN 0353-0329 (tiskana izdaja)
2463-7807 (spletna izdaja); <https://ojs.inz.si/pnz>
DOI <https://doi.org/10.51663/pnz.66.1>

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Izdajatelj/Published by: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino/Institute of Contemporary History,
Privoz 11, SI-1000 Ljubljana, tel. (386) 01 200 31 20, fax (386) 01 200 31 60,
e-mail: jure.gasparic@inz.si

Sofinancer/Financially supported by: Javna agencija za znanstvenoraziskovalno in inovacijsko
dejavnost Republike Slovenije/ Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency

Računalniški prelom/Typesetting: Studio Aleja d.o.o.

Tisk/Printed by: Medium d.o.o.

Cena/Price: 15,00 EUR

Zamenjave/Exchange: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino/Institute of Contemporary History,
Privoz 11, SI-1000 Ljubljana

Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino so indeksirani v/are indexed in: Scopus, ERIH Plus, Historical
Abstract, ABC-CLIO, PubMed, CEEOL, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, EBSCOhost

Številka vpisa v razvid medijev: 720

Za znanstveno korektnost člankov odgovarjajo avtorji/ The publisher assumes no
responsibility for statements made by authors

Fotografija na naslovnici:

Telovadišče Ljubljanskega Sokola III za Bežigradom, prva polovica tridesetih let

Vir: FŠ 1328, avtor neznan, hrani Muzej športa

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1.01

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51663/pnz.66.1.04>

Uroš Šešum,* Miroslav Radivojević**

Economic Measures in the Activities of the Serbian Chetnik Organisation in the Kosovo and Bitola *Vilayets*, 1904–1908: A Case Study

IZVLEČEK

EKONOMSKI UKREPI V DELOVANJU SRBSKE ČETNIŠKE ORGANIZACIJE V KOSOVSKEM IN BITOLSKEM VILAJETU 1904–1908: ŠTUDIJA PRIMERA

Ekonomske metode so imele pomožno, a hkrati zelo pomembno vlogo v boju, ki so ga vodile gverilske enote Srbske četniške organizacije (SCO) v vilajetih Kosovo in Bitola Osmanskega cesarstva za doseg nacionalnih ciljev. Po zgledu in izkušnjah konkurenčnih komitskih organizacij (Makedonske revolucionarne organizacije – MRO; Bolgarsko-makedonsko-odrinke revolucionarne organizacije – BMORO; Tajne makedonsko-odrinke revolucionarne organizacije – TMORO; Notranje makedonsko-odrinke revolucionarne organizacije – NMORO) je tudi srbska revolucionarna struktura v Osmanskem cesarstvu uporabljala ekonomske ukrepe kot sredstvo za pridobivanje pravoslavnega prebivalstva Bitolskega in Kosovskega vilajeta v svoje vrste. Ker so se izvajale z namenom uresničevanja nacionalnih in državnih interesov Kraljevine Srbije, je navedene dejavnosti mogoče opredeliti kot obliko ekonomskega nacionalizma.

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Ključne besede: Osmansko cesarstvo, Srbija, Bolgarija, Makedonija, Stara Srbija, četniki, komiti, Notranja makedonsko-odrinska revolucionarna organizacija (NMORO), Bolgarska ekzarhija

ABSTRACT

Economic methods played a supplementary yet highly significant role in the struggle conducted by the guerrilla units of the Serbian Chetnik Organisation (SCO) in the Kosovo and Bitola (Monastir) vilayets of the Ottoman Empire, aiding in the achievement of national objectives. Following the example and experience of the rival comitadji organisations (Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation – MRO; Bulgarian-Macedonian-Adrianople Revolutionary Organisation – BMARO; Secret Macedonian-Adrianople Revolutionary Organisation – SMARO; Internal Macedonian-Adrianople Revolutionary Organisation – IMARO), the Serbian revolutionary structure in the Ottoman Empire similarly employed economic measures as a means of attracting the Orthodox population of the Bitola and Kosovo vilayets into its ranks. Since these activities were conducted to promote the national and state interests of the Kingdom of Serbia, they can be characterised as a form of economic nationalism.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire, Serbia, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Old Serbia, Chetniks, comitadji, Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (IMRO), Bulgarian Exarchate.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explore a largely overlooked subject: economic nationalism in the struggle of the Serbian Chetnik Organisation (SCO) within the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the 20th century. While this topic has been discussed within a broader set of studies, it has not been examined as a standalone, fully developed issue. Therefore, the authors aim to identify the methods of material incentives and pressure used in the struggle by the Serbian guerrilla units (*chetas*) and the Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (MRO), and to assess how and to what extent these methods were employed.¹ The article seeks to find and describe concrete examples of these methods being applied on both sides – the SCO and the MRO – since actions taken by one often triggered similar responses from the other. This methodological approach was also adopted because the MRO, as the older organisation

¹ In this paper, the various organisations will be referred to by the name and acronym valid at the time of mention. Although the *comitadji* and Chetniks are essentially synonymous, for simplicity, the former term will denote members of the MRO/BMARO/SMARO/IMARO, while the latter will refer to Serbian guerrilla units. To prevent confusion, villages recognising the Patriarchate and receiving the Chetnik Organisation will be described as Serbian, while those under the Exarchate or linked to the *comitadji* will be classified as Bulgarian.

with an established structure, held a monopoly on such actions and possessed a significant advantage until 1904. In preparing the article, the traditional historiographical method was employed. The authors conducted the necessary research, primarily through examining published archival materials² and, to a lesser extent, unpublished sources and available literature. The findings were subjected to critique, analysis, and synthesis in the written text. The article is structured according to a combined thematic-chronological principle. Geographically, it covers parts of two major administrative units of the Ottoman Empire – the Kosovo and Bitola³ *vilayets*.

In the Ottoman Empire during the 19th century, several administrative reforms were implemented. Starting in 1864, the largest administrative units, the *eyalets*, were gradually replaced by *vilayets*. Ultimately, the 1867 Vilayet Law (*Vilayet-i Umumiye Nizamnamesi*) decreed that *vilayets* would become the first-level administrative division across the Empire. The structure of lower administrative units remained unchanged, so *vilayets*, like the former *eyalets*, were divided into *sanjaks*, which were further subdivided into *kazas*. *Kazas* were typically divided into *nahiyes*. During the second half of the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire frequently experienced changes in the administrative affiliation of *kazas* and *sanjaks* to neighbouring *vilayets*, as well as the abolition, renaming, and reorganisation of *vilayets*. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Empire's European territories were divided into the *vilayets* of Kosovo, Bitola (Monastir), Salonica, Scutari, Janina, and Adrianople. Between 1904 and 1908, the Kosovo *vilayet* included the *sanjaks* of Pljevlja, Sjenica, Peć, Prizren, Priština, and Skopje (with key centres: Skopje, Veles, Kumanovo, Kriva Palanka, Kratovo, Štip, Kočani, and Radoviš). The Bitola *vilayet* encompassed the *sanjaks* of Bitola (including towns like Bitola, Prilep, Kičevo, and Ohrid), Debar, Serfiže, Elbasan, and Korçë (Göricë).⁴

Claims on Ottoman territories in the Balkans by Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece were based on the former extent of the Serbian and Bulgarian Empires and Byzantium, as well as on the fact that a significant portion of the population in all the *vilayets*, except for the Scutari *vilayet*, consisted of Orthodox communities, including Slavic, Greek, Aromanian, and Albanian groups. At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, the territorial claims of the three Balkan states overlapped in the areas east and west of the Vardar River valley. All three rivals referred to this region as Macedonia; however, under this term, they did not always encompass the same territory. Thus, the geographical term “Macedonia”, which originally covered the

2 The acts related to the Serbian Chetnik action were mainly published in the collection of Serbian diplomatic materials *Dokumenti o spoljnoj politici Kraljevine Srbije 1903–1914*. Within this collection of documents, a subset of four volumes was also created, containing solely the acts connected to the Serbian Chetnik action and organisation.

3 The official Ottoman Turkish name for the Bitola *vilayet* was Monastir, but the Slavic and more widely recognised form Bitola is used in this article.

4 Miloš Jagodić, *Srpsko-albanski odnosi u Kosovskom vilajetu 1878–1912* (Belgrade: Zavod za udžbenike, 2009), 7–8. Uroš Šešum, *Srpska četnička akcija (1897–1908). Oružana diplomatija* (Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 2019), 17–18. Aleksandar M. Savić, “Od ejaleta i vilajeta do nahije – administrativna podela južnih srpskih krajeva (1834–1879),” in Suzana Rajić, Uroš Šešum, and Aleksandar M. Savić, eds., *Novooslobođeni krajevi Srbije 1833–1878–1913* (Belgrade: Centar za srpske studije, 2025), 27–53. Milena Gostović, *Kosovski vilajet 1879–1900. Godišnji izveštaji (salname)* (Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 2021).

hinterland of Thessaloniki and the Aegean coast, was interpreted more narrowly or broadly by each of the claimants. In Greek eyes, Macedonia encompassed the area from Thessaloniki in the south to the Šar Mountains in the north (including the Thessaloniki, Bitola, and Skopje *sanjaks* of the Kosovo *vilayet*, along with two *kazas* of Prizren south of the Šar Mountains). Bulgaria, by contrast, understood Macedonia as encompassing the region from the Rila, Rhodope, and Osogovo mountains in the east to the Šar Mountains and the Karadag mountain range in the north, the watersheds of the Devoll and Bistrica rivers, the Grammos and Olympus mountains in the west, and the Aegean Sea in the south. The Serbian perception of the territory that formed the heart of the medieval Serbian state evolved throughout the 19th and into the early 20th century, along with the understanding of the concept of Macedonia. The central part of the former Serbian state had already begun to be called Old Serbia in the first half of the 19th century. Among the Serbian political and cultural elite, there was no disagreement regarding the northern boundary of this term, which matched the southern borders of the Principality/Kingdom of Serbia. However, the perception of the southern boundary of Old Serbia in relation to Macedonia changed over time. By the final decades of the 19th century, the view had become established that Macedonia extended northwards to the Šar Mountains. However, its northern part, roughly corresponding to the southern borders of present-day North Macedonia, was regarded as ethnically Serbian, and the term Serbian Macedonia was accordingly used to refer to it. In the early years of the 20th century, the Serbian scholar Jovan Cvijić, followed by the political elite, gradually extended the boundaries of the term Old Serbia first to the southern limits of the *Sanjak* of Skopje, that is, to the borders of the Kosovo *vilayet*. In 1907, the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs finally codified the Serbian conception of Old Serbia. From that point onward, in addition to the Kosovo *vilayet*, the north-western parts of the Bitola *vilayet* were officially included according to the Serbian government's position (the *kazas* of Rakalar/Reka, part of the Sanjak of Dibra, and parts of the Sanjak of Bitola: the *kazas* of Prilep, Kičevo, and Ohrid). As a result, while Bulgarians and Greeks regarded the Bitola and Salonica *vilayets*, as well as the territory of the Kosovo *vilayet* up to the Serbian-Ottoman border and the Šar Mountains in the north, as Macedonia, the Serbs challenged the northern boundaries of the contemporary geopolitical concept of Macedonia. They narrowed it to align with the borders of Old Serbia, in accordance with their interests. From the Serbian point of view, until 1907, the Chetnik operations took place across the territory of Old Serbia and Macedonia, but following the codification of terminology, they were confined solely within the boundaries of Old Serbia.⁵

Regarding the chronological framework, several markers must be established. The crucial event for understanding the nature of the national guerrilla struggles, which also

5 Žarko Ilić, "Srpska zemlja na jugu – između istorije i etnografije, teorije i prakse," in Suzana Rajić and Žarko Ilić, eds., *Kralj Milan Obrenović, oslobodilac i reformator. Zasluge i poricanja. Tematski zbornik radova* (Beograd: Istraživačko-izdavački centar "Stari Vlah", 2025), 42–56. Šešum, *Srpska četnička akcija*, 31–33, 237–48. For the geographical understanding of the concepts of Old Serbia and Macedonia in the modern era, see: Žarko Ilić, *Geografska percepcija srpske zemlje i centralnog Balkana u novom veku – ime, prostor granica* (Beograd: Huk izdavaštvo, in print).

had economic dimensions, is the establishment of the Bulgarian Exarchate in 1870, which gave rise to opposing national propaganda. To better understand the topic, the authors of the article briefly outline the processes that began with this event. The second point, and the *terminus a quo* of the study, is the year 1897, when the terror of the Bulgarian Macedonian-Adrianople Revolutionary Organisation (BMARO) against Serbian and Greek “propaganda” began, while at the same time the first organised recruitment of people originating from Old Serbia and Macedonia was recorded in Belgrade for potential use in armed *chetas* in the Ottoman Empire. The most significant period of struggle between the opposing sides began in 1904, with the establishment of the organisational structure for Serbian Chetnik action on the ground, whereas the Young Turk Revolution (1908) brought the armed confrontation to an end. The last two years are therefore taken as the chronological limits for analysing the economic methods of struggle employed by the two organisations.

* * *

Economic nationalism can be defined as the deliberate integration of economic policies, incentives, pressures, and everyday practices to align the economy with national identity and interests. It functions both as an ideological project and a subtle cultural mechanism for nation-building in multi-ethnic or imperial contexts. Stefan Berger has demonstrated, through his research on the overlooked link between explicit economic nationalism – as state-directed protectionism or resource control – and more diffuse forms of “economic nationness”, that this phenomenon bridges top-down strategies with grassroots responses. “Economic nationness” refers to the subtle, culturally embedded ways in which economic activities, such as boycotts of rival traders, ethnically preferential credit networks, or restrictions on seasonal workers from opposing national groups, become infused with national significance and help reproduce national boundaries in everyday life. Eric Storm’s global history of nationalism further places it within transnational developments, from early liberal-emancipatory forms to exclusionary and identity-driven variants shaped by industrialisation, migration, and state rivalries. Helga Schultz’s work on the history and culture of economic nationalism in East Central Europe emphasises its role as a developmental strategy for peripheral elites, while Marvin Suesse highlights the inherent “nationalist dilemma” of reconciling romantic national ideals with pragmatic engagement in the global economy.⁶

6 Stefan Berger and Thomas Fetzner, eds., *Nationalism and the Economy: Explorations into a Neglected Relationship* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2019), 1–18, 43–63. Stefan Berger and Eric Storm, eds., *Writing the History of Nationalism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 1–18. Helga Schultz and Eduard Kubü, eds., *History and Culture of Economic Nationalism in East Central Europe* (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2006), 7–30. Marvin Suesse, *The Nationalist Dilemma: A Global History of Economic Nationalism, 1776–Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 1–11. Eric Storm, *Nationalism: A World History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024), 1–10, 60–172.

In this study, the concept is operationalised through concrete measures of the Serbian Chetnik Organisation and its rival, the Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation, in the Kosovo and Bitola *vilayets* between 1904 and 1908. These two administrative units provide an exceptionally suitable “laboratory” for studying economic nationalism because they formed a volatile frontier of overlapping Serbian and Bulgarian claims within the Ottoman millet system, offering analytical variation and leverage. The regional diversity allows testing the relative effectiveness of incentives versus coercive measures under varying local rural economic conditions. Situated in the broader Ottoman and Balkan context, these *vilayets* exemplify how imperial religious frameworks, above all the Patriarchate versus the Exarchate, enabled economic instruments to fuel national competition. This parallels East Central European patterns of peripheral nation-building (Schultz and Kubu), the global nationalist dilemma of ideology versus economic reality (Suesse), and the transnational transformations of nationalism analysed by Storm and Berger. In the Serbian Chetnik Actions, this took the form of diffuse “economic nationness”, as conceptualised by Berger. Everyday economic practices, such as selective boycotts, preferential aid and credit networks, selective seizure and restitution of livestock,⁷ preferential support for selected traders and communities, and favourable or restrictive treatment of seasonal migrant labourers, effectively tied material interests to Serbian national affiliation and proved highly successful in expanding the Serbian sphere among the Orthodox population.⁸

The study contributes to a comparative understanding of how economic nationalism functioned at the intersection of empires, migrations, and rival propagandas in rural areas in the early twentieth century.

From Members of the *Millet* to Members of the Organisation

The struggle for the use of the Slavic language in religious services and for bishops of the same ethnic affiliation as the faithful in predominantly Bulgarian regions of the Ottoman Empire, under the spiritual authority of the Ecumenical Patriarchate – which was under Greek dominance and influenced politically by the Hellenic Kingdom – led to the establishment of the Bulgarian Exarchate as a separate religious community (*millet*) in 1870. According to the Sultan’s *firman* establishing the Exarchate, the church consisted of 15 dioceses in which the Christian population was almost

7 Arson attacks, though violent, can be interpreted as an extreme and coercive expression of economic nationness, since they directly destroyed the material foundations of rival group livelihoods in order to force a change in national-religious affiliation.

8 Berger and Storm, *Writing the History of Nationalism*, 1–18. Berger and Fetzer, *Nationalism and the Economy*, 1–18, 43–63. Schultz and Kubu, *History and Culture of Economic Nationalism*, 7–30. Suesse, *The Nationalist Dilemma*, 1–37. Storm, *Nationalism: A World History*, 1–10, 133–72.

entirely Bulgarian or Slavic.⁹ For the other dioceses with a significant presence of Orthodox non-Slavic inhabitants, the *firman* stated that they would become part of the Exarchate if all or two-thirds of the Orthodox believers decided to join.¹⁰ The Ecumenical Patriarchate declared the Exarchate a schismatic church in 1872. Despite the majority's support for the Exarchate, the diocesan structure of the Ecumenical Patriarchate continued to operate alongside in all dioceses in Macedonia and Old Serbia: Skopje, Prespa, Pelagonia, Veles and Debar. This meant that within the same area, there were two dioceses, each following the believers' choice of one or the other religious community (*millet*). The term "*millet*", literally translated from Arabic, means "nation", which soon led Bulgaria, Greece, and later Serbia to associate *millet* affiliation with national identity. This became particularly evident after the establishment of the Bulgarian autonomous state, i.e. the expansion and gaining of independence by Serbia at the Congress of Berlin in 1878. Many co-nationals from all three Balkan states continued to live in the Ottoman Empire, and their liberation alongside the restoration of the medieval empires became a shared goal. In this context, Macedonia was a point of contention, as all claimed it. As mentioned, alongside the Patriarchist – Rum *millet* (Roman/Eastern Orthodox Christian), the Bulgarian *millet* also existed within the Ottoman Empire, but a separate Serbian *millet* was never established. For this reason, the Serbs conducted their national propaganda in Macedonia within the framework of the Patriarchist. The Principality of Bulgaria, meanwhile, utilised its formal advantage to encompass the entire Slavic Christian population within its nation through church-school autonomy, which fell under the jurisdiction of the *millet*. From the mid-1880s, Serbia responded by establishing consulates, expanding its educational network, and negotiating with the Ecumenical Patriarchate over the appointment of bishops of Serbian nationality in areas chiefly inhabited by Serbs, as well as in regions where the patriarchists were Slavs without a strong national identity. By the turn of the century, it succeeded in this endeavour by securing the appointment of the Serb Firmilian Dražić as bishop of Skopje.¹¹

9 At its founding by the *firman*, the Exarchate's structure included, in addition to the undoubtedly Bulgarian-populated territories, the western dioceses – Niš, Piro, Veles, Samokov, and Kyustendil. These areas were inhabited either entirely or predominantly by believers who were Serbs or Slavs without a distinct Serbian or Bulgarian national or ethnic identity. – Uroš Šešum, "Pretpostavke srpske crkveno-prosvetne politike u Skopskoj, Velesko-debarskoj, Pelagonskoj i Prespanskoj eparhiji i njeni rezultati 1887–1889," in Rajić and Ilić, *Kralj Milan Obrenović*, 60–68.

10 These are the dioceses of Skopje, Pelagonia, and Ohrid-Prespa.

11 Kamel S. Abu Jaber, "The Millet System in Nineteenth Century Ottoman Empire," *The Muslim World* 57/3 (July 1967): 212–23. Douglas Dakin, *The Greek Struggle in Macedonia 1897–1913* (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1966), 14–15. Miloš Jagodić, "Nufusko pitanje. Problem zvaničnog priznavanja srpske nacije u Turskoj 1894–1910," *Istorijski časopis* 57 (2008): 343–53. Suzana Rajić, *Aleksandar Obrenović. Vladar na prelazu vekova. Sukobljeni svetovi* (Beograd: Srpska književna zadruga, 2014), 221, 224, 273–77. Suzana Rajić, *Vladan Đorđević. Biografija pouzdanog obrenovićevca* (Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike, 2007), 129–35, 146–58. Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey. Volume II: Reform, Revolution, and Republic: The Rise of Modern Turkey, 1808–1975* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 123–28. Šešum, *Srpska četnička akcija*, 16–21, 31–37.



The transformation of the church-educational struggle into an action involving armed bands and revolutionary organisations of Serbs, Greeks, and Bulgarians within the Ottoman Empire occurred at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. The first step in this process was the foundation of the Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (MRO) in Thessaloniki in 1894 (from 1896, known as the Bulgarian-Macedonian-Adrianople Revolutionary Organisation – BMARO; from 1902, the Secret Macedonian-Adrianople Revolutionary Organisation – SMARO; from 1905, the Internal Macedonian-Adrianople Revolutionary Organisation – IMARO). In addition to pursuing Macedonia's autonomy and acting against the Ottoman authorities, its statutes already included measures to suppress Serbian and Greek "propaganda". Accepting logistical and financial support from the Principality of Bulgaria, the Committee, with occasional confrontations, mainly acted in the interest of the Bulgarian state. Once Macedonian autonomy was achieved through the actions of the Exarchists, it would, as in the case of Eastern Rumelia (1885), lead to its annexation by the state that supported and often directed the revolutionary network. From 1897 onwards, the organisation used assassinations of prominent pro-Serbian leaders, priests, educators, and some wavering individuals within its own ranks as a method of struggle. As a result, the Serbian government saw it as an extended arm of Bulgaria within the Ottoman Empire.

In the same year, due to the activities of the *comitadji* and Greek organisations in Old Serbia and Macedonia, as well as the potential for a war between Greece and Turkey, the official authorities in Belgrade began covertly organising the *cheta* leaders and their men for possible deployment to the field. Although the Serbian government in 1897 abandoned plans to send pro-Serbian or Serbian-oriented *chetas* into the Ottoman Empire in the subsequent years (1898–1901), authorities received outlaws who had taken refuge in Serbia during seasons unsuitable for *cheta* operations, offering them material support and shelter. However, they did not themselves form *chetas* from outlaws who were Ottoman subjects, nor did they influence their activities in Turkey.

During the same period, up to 1901, certain regions such as Drimkol, Skopska Crna Gora, and Azot¹² saw the formation of spontaneously organised *chetas* to defend

12 These are three mountainous micro-regions where communities that identified themselves as Serbian formed the majority. In all three cases, almost the entire remaining Slavic Orthodox population of the administrative units they belonged to in 1901 were part of the Exarchist community and *comitadji* organisation. The three Drimkol Serbian-identified villages represented the only small Serbian enclave in the *Kaza* of Ohrid, Bitola *Vilayet*. The same was true of the Serbian community in Azot, in the *Kaza* of Veles, which from 1901 was part of the Kosovo *Vilayet*, *Sanjak* of Skopje. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the mountainous region of Skopska Crna Gora, north of Skopje, was part of the Skopje *kaza* and *sanjak* within the Kosovo *Vilayet*. The Serbian community there, which was the majority in the Exarchist villages of Skopska Crna Gora (excluding a few peripheral villages), along with a few Serbian-identified villages in the mountainous micro-region of Tavor, formed an enclave relative to the Exarchist and Muslim villages across the rest of the *Kaza* of Skopje. – Uroš Šešum, "O broju Srba u Južnoj Staroj Srbiji 1903–1908. Godine," *Vardarski zbornik* 10 (2015): 156, 162, 167.

Serbian-aligned villages against the *comitadji*. These activities were initially unplanned and lacked coordination. However, from 1901 onwards, the Head of the Department for National Policy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Serbia began to directly oversee and guide the Chetnik actions in Old Serbia and Macedonia. Following a brief period of cooperation and negotiations for joint action with BMARO and its various factions, the Serbian Chetnik Organisation, founded a year earlier, began operating independently from 1904, functioning as a citizens' association. Initially, this was as a means of self-defence against a renewed wave of terror by the *comitadji*,¹³ and later aimed at expanding the network of Serbian-identified settlements, thus creating and consolidating the Serbian sphere of interest in the two *vilayets*.¹⁴

Structure, Support and Action

Some signs of economic nationalism were already visible in the organisational structure of the Serbian Chetnik Organisation, which, in many ways was essentially a copy of the *comitadji* organisation. Similar to its rival and simultaneously model organisation, the basic unit of the SCO was the village committee. It held certain judicial functions: resolving minor property disputes, inheritance issues, delinquency, moral offences, matters concerning stray livestock, compensation for damage caused by poorly supervised livestock to neighbours, and so forth. An important component of the village committee was the treasury, into which funds from fines for various offences – such as losing a rifle or being involved in a civil dispute – were deposited, along with small monthly contributions. These funds served as a mutual aid, a “black fund”, from which, in cases of peasant arrests, support was provided for imprisonment, bribery of Ottoman officials, legal fees, and aid to the poor and the families of the deceased.

13 The period preceding the open war started in the second half of 1904, marked by SMARO's failure to eliminate the Serbian-aligned core in the Kumanovo and Kičevo regions through terror and *cheta* attacks, and lasted until spring 1905. During this time, both organisations, taking advantage of a temporary weakness, avoided full-scale conflict at all points.

14 Vladimir Ilić, *Srpska četnička akcija 1903–1912* (Beograd: Ecolibri, 2006), 14–47. Jovan M. Jovanović, *Južna Srbija od kraja XVIII veka do oslobođenja* (Beograd: TANESI, 1990), 143–65. Predrag Pejić, *Četnički pokret u Kraljevini Srbiji 1903–1918* (Kragujevac: Pogledi, 2007), 25–50. Uroš Šešum, “Društvo protiv Srba 1897–1902. Metodi i mere bugarske diplomatije, Egzarhije i Bugarsko-makedonsko odrinske revolucionarne organizacije protiv širenja srpskog uticaja u Južnoj Staroj Srbiji i Makedoniji 1897–1902,” *Srpske studije* 4 (2013): 79–100. Šešum, *Srpska četnička akcija*, 37–166.

Some of the funds in these cases also originated from the Mountain Headquarters,¹⁵ Serbian consulates, and higher levels of the organisation (committees). Expenditure was controlled by the regional *vojvodas* (leaders of the guerrilla units),¹⁶ who, with their own *chetas*, defended the population even against fines imposed by local Muslim notables.

The organisation sent medical supplies and doctors to the field, who treated its members. For more serious cases, free beds were provided in hospitals and sanatoriums in Serbia. Within the jurisdiction of the church-school funds, credit institutions were established. Through these, peasants could obtain low-interest loans, which kept them connected to the movement, while the SCO's funds expanded.¹⁷ Aid also came from Serbia for building or repairing churches and schools, as well as for provisioning them. Books, most often collections of Serbian epic folk poems, were also given to peasants. The organisation provided assistance to displaced persons, prominent individuals, distinguished fighters, their immediate relatives, and, when necessary, helped them find employment or allocated land to them in Serbia.¹⁸

The way the rival MRO/BMARO/SMARO/IMARO operated involved collecting the so-called "*comitadji tax*" or forced loan, as well as providing supplies at the expense of the rural population. Well-documented cases date back to 1902, when

15 Mountain Headquarters represented the command bodies with operational and strategic authority over the Serbian *chetas* in the Ottoman Empire. The first of the two Mountain Headquarters was established on Mount Kozjak, near the Serbian–Ottoman border, in Ottoman territory in February 1905. Initially, it was headed by a Serbian Army lieutenant, assisted by two non-commissioned officers. The Kozjak Headquarters was tasked with directing Chetnik operations east of the Vardar River by coordinating the units and their commanders, the *vojvodas*. In April 1905, an identical command, also led by a Serbian Army lieutenant, was established on Mount Babuna, with the same responsibilities and duties in the area west of the Vardar River. From 1905 to 1908, the two Mountain Headquarters, commanded by Serbian Army officers and directly assisted by several Serbian non-commissioned officers, and occasionally officers, effectively carried out Chetnik operations within their respective areas, in mutual coordination and following directives from the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Besides military authority, the heads of the staffs, by virtue of their control over the *vojvodas*, also held the highest organisational powers on the ground. According to their areas of operation, the staff based in Kozjak was referred to as the Mountain Staff of Eastern Povardarie, while that in Babuna was called the Western Povardarie staff. – Šešum, *Srpska četnička akcija*, 166–70, 200–02, 223, 248–52, 259–61, 269–96, 316–18, 323–24, 336, 344–57. Šešum, "Srpska četnička organizacija u Staroj Srbiji 1903–1908. Terenska organizacija," *Srpske studije* 2 (2011): 247–49.

16 The *vojvoda* of each *cheta* had a defined geographical area of operation. Besides his main combat responsibilities, he also served as a representative of the local revolutionary authority. Because he was in charge of a specific district, he was known as a regional *vojvoda*.

17 In the last decade of the 19th century, within the Serbian leadership, there was an initiative to settle craftsmen and merchants from Serbia in Skopje, thereby financially strengthening the Serbian core. The start of brewery construction in 1891 was a step in this direction. The measures planned in Skopje would have represented the first step towards establishing a Serbian bank and/or other credit institutions. This idea was reconsidered in 1907. The bank was meant to buy Turkish and Albanian land for the benefit of the Serbian action, as well as to bolster the crafts and trade of the population aligned with the Patriarchate. – Ljiljana Aleksić-Pejković and Vasilije Krestić, eds., *Dokumenti o spoljnoj politici Kraljevine Srbije 1903–1914. Organizacija srpska odbrana (1903–1905) iz fondova Arhiva Srbije*, (DSPKS), knj. II, *Dodatak 1* (Beograd: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 2008), No. 263. Mihailo Vojvodić, *Stojan Novaković i Vladimir Karić* (Beograd: Clio, 2003), 83, 85–86, 115, 141. Nikolay Simeonov, "Struktura, metodi i zhtvni na srabskata vaorazhena propaganda v Makedonia (1904–1908)," *Anamneza* 1/2 (2006), accessed on 10 February 2026, <http://anamnesis.info/broi2/Simeonov.pdf>.

18 DSPKS, II-d1, No. 389, 395, 403; II-d2, No. 14, 16, 82, 110, 121, 243, Zapisnici sednica; II-d3, No. 65, 131, 156, 164, 182, 188, 242, 267, 277, 282–84, 286, 310, Zapisnici sednica Centralnog odbora, Prilog IV; III-d, No. 24, 43, 51, 56, 64, 85. Biljana Vučetić, "Sećanja Antonija Todorovića na revolucionarnu akciju srpskog naroda u Turskoj 1904–1914. godine," *Mešovita grada – Miscellanea* 28 (2007), 286. Uroš Šešum, "Srpska četnička organizacija," 249–50, 252–53, 255–56.

vojvodas forced peasants to pay the levy and enrol in the *comitadji*. In return for providing the “tax” and fighters to the organisation, the village received rifles.¹⁹ By the end of April 1904, the SMARO *chetas* in the Kriva Reka basin, between Kumanovo and Kratovo, demanded sums of money from the (Serbian) Patriarchist villages far exceeding those required of Exarchate villages. Initially, the population was subjected to extortion to prevent harassment, and from early 1905, in addition to money, acceptance of the exarch’s religious authority was also demanded. The pressure was accompanied by threats of burning villages and killing the most prominent pro-Serbian leaders of Kriva Reka.²⁰

The SCO founders recognised that collecting taxes, forced loans, or any other burdens on the peasants could be counterproductive for expanding their influence. Financing was almost entirely sourced from the Serbian state budget and from voluntary contributions from the homeland and Serbs in Austro-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Montenegro. The only material obligation of the population, according to the Organisation’s policy, was to provide bread and shelter for the *chetas*. Meat, lard, and other provisions were purchased from the peasants at market prices. Loans of money, food, or goods from villagers or the local village committee treasury were available only when transportation to the field was difficult, with the obligation for repayment or reimbursement of expenses by the *cheta* committees or individuals. In addition to weapons and ammunition, the Organisation supplied the village *chetas* with medical supplies, tobacco, clothing, footwear, and other equipment.

In cases of abuse or disregard of the established practice, appropriate measures were implemented. In the spring of 1907, the SCO Executive Committee in Vranje prohibited teachers, who often held important positions in the village organisation, from collecting taxes for the school fund. Throughout the year and at the beginning of the following year, a thorough investigation of actions in Eastern Povardarie was also conducted. Due to the collection of unlawful levies, in the form of the *comitadji* tax, which in fact constituted an abuse; funds allegedly aimed at helping prisoners,²¹ extortion, embezzlement, and other irregularities, the accused *cheta* leaders were removed from the field: vojvodas Krsta Kovačević, Jovan Dolgač, Spasa Garda, Đorđe Sokolović, Stevan Nedić, and Cene Marković, as well as the head of the Mountain Headquarters of Eastern Povardarie, Mihailo Ristić Džervinac. The confiscated money was either returned to its owners or directed towards the purpose for which it had been collected, prisoners, thereby enhancing the Organisation’s reputation.²²

19 DAS, KB, Političko-prosvetno odeljenje (PP), 1902, r. 108; DSPKS, II-d1, No. 2.

20 DAS, KB, PP, 1905, r. 13. Šešum, *Srpska četnička akcija*, 122.

21 Information that money was being collected for a “self-styled fund” had emerged in the previous year, which parts of the Chetnik organisational structure regarded as something that should be punished. – DSPKS, II-d2, No. 217. Ilić, *Srpska četnička akcija*, 100.

22 DAS, KB, PP, 1902, r. 14; 1905, r. 13; DSPKS, II-d1, No. 49, 299, 363, 416, 448, 452; II-d1, No. 16, 32, 35, 50, 59, 60, 63, 73; II-d3, No. 7, 9, 23, 25, 37, 51, 58, 75, 82, 85, 110–11, 121, 126, 148, 158, 162, 176, 180, 208, 229–30, 242, 268, 275, 278–80, 292–93, 307, 313, Zapisnici sednica Centralnog odbora, Prilog IV; III-d, No. 30, 39, 66, 75–76, 99–100, 185, prilog II. Vučetić, “Sećanja Antonija Todorovića,” 283, 292–94. Šešum, *Srpska četnička akcija*, 332–33, 335–37. Šešum, “Srpska četnička organizacija,” 252.

Irregularities also occurred in Western Povardarie, where between 1905 and 1906, the Chetnik village committees apparently collected money for their treasuries from the peasants, based on the financial state of each household. With variations in levies and uneven burdens within or between villages, funds were sometimes not collected at the end of each month as planned. It is very likely that this involved an “armed fund”, since the SCO, before 1907, could not establish a reliable channel for transferring rifles to areas across the Vardar. Correspondence about the possibility of compensating for the lack of money in that district through taxation or drawing from village treasuries arose again in the early months of 1908.²³

Seasonal Workers

As the conflict escalated, methods of economic pressure on the population to join one of the groups intensified, especially when combined with physical coercion. Most inhabitants of the western regions of present-day North Macedonia, due to infertile soil and Albanian pressure, were compelled to work seasonally in Balkan countries – Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania. Consequently, they became a valuable recruitment base for the *chetas*, and there were also ways to pressure their families in the home villages to shift their allegiance to a particular *millet*. The clash of national propaganda put seasonal workers (*pečalbari*), members of rival factions, at risk of having their hospitality withdrawn, which would have resulted in significant material losses. With the suspension of seasonal work, they found themselves unable to feed their families.

The pressure was applied to the *pečalbari* even before the outbreak of mutual armed actions. At the beginning of June 1901, the Serbian Consulate in Bitola requested that surveillance measures be taken against a certain Spira Kone Hadži Mitre from Prilep while he was in the territory of the Kingdom of Serbia for trading purposes. In his hometown, he reportedly discouraged peasants from visiting the Serbian bookstore and caused other “troubles”. In addition to his main activity, during his journey, Hadži Mitre allegedly intended to collect contributions from seasonal workers from Prilep in Serbia, for BMARO activities.²⁴ The following year, the police authorities took measures against the *pečalbari* from the villages of Galičnik and Tresonče near Mavrovo. In their home region, they were “obstructing” the Serbian propaganda efforts, hosting an Exarchist priest in their homes, and sending their children to the Bulgarian school. The Consulate in Bitola requested that, if they did not shift their stance, the authorities prevent them from remaining in Serbia any longer. In contrast, the attitude of several *pečalbari* from the village of Slepče, near Prilep, was viewed positively.²⁵

A significantly increased pressure arose as armed clashes intensified between the Serbian and the comitadji *chetas*. *Pečalbari* from the Kriva Reka and Ovče Polje areas,

²³ DSPKS, II-d2, No. 127; II-d3, No. 278; III-d, No. 41, 52,

²⁴ DAS, KB, PP, 1901, r. 77.

²⁵ Ibid., 1902, r. 64, 97.

who mostly worked in Sofia, were forced in late 1905 by the *comitadji* organisation and the Bulgarian government to withdraw their villages from the Serbian armed-band network and return them to the Exarchate. Around 200 of them faced threats of execution, expulsion, or heavy fines. As a result, twelve villages in these regions temporarily came under the control of the *comitadji* organisation and the Exarchate. The following year, Bulgaria intensified its economic pressure: at the border, *pečalbari* were stopped and required to present a certificate from an Exarchate priest confirming their affiliation. Border guards sometimes beat, maimed, or robbed the seasonal workers. These measures somewhat increased the influence of IMARO in the Kriva Palanka area. In response, the SCO requested that all Exarchate followers working temporarily in Serbia be expelled and that *pečalbari* from villages aligned with the Patriarchate be employed instead.²⁶ The *vojvodas*, for their part, were instructed to inform the inhabitants of loyal settlements that, instead of going to Bulgaria, they could seek seasonal work in Serbia.²⁷

In Belgrade, where lists containing information on *pečalbari* were received from the field, pressure was exerted on those from the Exarchate-aligned Kičevo region, where most peasants went to Serbia for seasonal work, to influence their relatives and neighbours to align themselves with the Patriarchate and the SCO. Several letters attesting to this practice have been preserved. One of these letters was sent to their native village of Orlanci by certain Stevan, Todor, and Silan. Writing from Belgrade in 1905, they warned their closest family members to accept a Serb Patriarchate rather than the Bulgarian Exarchate priest, as they had previously done. Otherwise, they cautioned, “neither the house nor its people will remain alive”, and they themselves would be “devoured by the fish in the Sava and the Danube”.²⁸ Pressure by the Serbian authorities was also exerted in 1906 on bakers from the Kičevo region, described as the “greatest Bulgarophiles” from Kozičino, as well as on a certain hired goods carrier, Tasa Veljanov from Tuin. This action, however, did not succeed, owing to the greater strength of the *comitadji*, who carried out brutal executions of village leaders or priests supporting the Serbian side, thereby maintaining or expanding the Exarchate network through fear in the Kičevo region.²⁹

The return of many villages and the gaining of new ones, as a result of the SCO's actions at the turn of 1906–1907, triggered a new wave of terror against *pečalbari* in Bulgaria. Contemporary reports from 1907 state that seasonal workers in Bulgaria were arrested, mistreated, or robbed if they failed to comply or refused to bring their villages back under the Exarchate. The Bulgarian official and semi-official press,

26 A characteristic case involved five seasonal labourers from the Skopje *kaza*. Due to an alleged dispute with the local *comitadji* committee, they applied in March 1906 for employment in Belgrade. Three of them clearly stated that they no longer wished to go to Bulgaria for seasonal work because of the levies imposed by IMARO. At the urging of the secret police of the Central Committee of the SCO, they were granted employment on the construction of the sewerage system. – DSPKS, II-d2, No. 48.

27 Šešum, *Srpska četnička akcija*, 208–09, 259. DSPKS, II-d2, No. 63.

28 DAS, KB, PP, 1905, r. 9; DSPKS, II-d1, No. 176.

29 DSPKS, II-d2, No. 95, 229. Simeonov, “Struktura, metodi i zhertvi na srabskata vaorazhena propaganda.” Šešum, *Srpska četnička akcija*, 232.

however, despite its own treatment of *pečalbari*, used the alleged “mistreatment” of Exarchist workers in Serbia in the spring of the following year for propaganda purposes and to inflame public opinion.³⁰

Convictions about allegiance, such as in the cases of the Exarchate and Bulgaria, also existed on the Serbian (Patriarshist) side. From the SCO and the organs of church-school autonomy, peasants received certificates of affiliation, which enabled them to travel for work through the established band channels and secured them safe employment in Serbia. The practical example of this is shown by certain Đorđe, Ljubomir, Mihailo, and Tatomir, who signed as “Old Serbians” and urged their relatives to receive “Priest Krste”. After doing so, they were to obtain a certificate from the municipality and the bishop confirming that a “Serbian priest” had visited them, and to send it to Serbia.³¹ It also happened that individuals temporarily accepted a Patriarchate priest to obtain the necessary certificates, only to later return to the Exarchate. Eight *pečalbari* from Kruševo in Belgrade did exactly this in 1905. About twenty of their fellow villagers, who had been expelled from Serbia and were further radicalised as a result, applied pressure on Serbian-aligned families and their priest to join the Exarchate. They also issued threats to the Serbian consul in Bitola.

There were also examples of different cases. Some *pečalbari* from Labuništa near Ohrid provided various services to the *comitadji*, but in order to hide this and obtain certificates of affiliation, they received a Patriarchate priest. Such conduct did not escape the notice of the Serbian diplomatic, educational, and ecclesiastical networks, and Belgrade was duly informed. In November 1905, during an incursion in the region of the Rabetinska River near Kičevo, Chetniks pursued “Bulgarophiles”, among them a certain Dragutin, the owner of a burek shop in Belgrade, where his brothers were also staying at the time. A characteristic case occurred in 1908 in Užice, where Pano Pendo Petrušev(ić) was arrested. Formerly a local *vojvoda* in Oraovac near Veles and a prominent opponent of the Chetnik Organisation in the Klepa area, he had been sentenced to death by a Turkish court and was working on the railway line in Užice. He was identified through a letter to his relatives, in which he stated that they should not think he had “become” a Serb merely because he was working in Serbia. He planned to travel soon to Sofia to lead an *IMARO cheta*.³²

Abuse also occurred on the other side. Certain individuals exploited the restrictive stance of the Serbian state authorities towards *pečalbari* from Exarchate villages, extorting money from them for protection or issuing false certificates of affiliation to the Patriarchate *millet*. Alongside the usurer and fraudster Janačko Anđelković, the dismissed commissioner of the organisation *Srpska braća*, a teacher from Kičevo was also involved. A certain Stojmen, a “dismissed” Chetnik, also misrepresented himself and collected contributions from Macedonian *pečalbari* in Austria-Hungary, allegedly

30 DSPKS, II-d2, No. 186–87, 217, 225, 235, 257, 267; II-d3, No. 229. Šešum, *Srpska četnička akcija*, 303, 350.

31 DSPKS, II-d1, No. 207.

32 DAS, KB, PP, 1905, r. 9; DSPKS, I-3/II, 1112; II-d1, No. 397; II-d3, No. 13; III-d, No. 63. Šešum, “Srpska četnička organizacija,” 253.

on behalf of the SCO.³³ Workers from Old Serbia and Macedonia, therefore, were an extremely vulnerable group, subject to pressure from revolutionary organisations at multiple levels, as well as various forms of abuse.

Fires and Livestock

The burning of houses, barns, haystacks, and crops was employed by both sides, significantly worsening the economic plight of the peasantry. Such measures were intended as warnings to individuals, parts of villages, or entire settlements to side with one of the organisations, aiming to prevent such reprisals from happening again. As early as 1901, BMARO *chetas*, aiming to intimidate, set fire to the house of the Serbian schoolteacher Anđelko Krstić in the mentioned village of Labuništa. In 1902, for failing to pay the mentioned forced loan, *comitadji* agents burned peasants' barns or other economic buildings as a form of coercion. They would then demand the money again. If refused a second time, they set fire to houses and even killed peasants. The death penalty also awaited anyone who sought protection from the Ottoman authorities. At the turn of 1905–1906, during the rival struggle for wavering settlements in the regions of Kriva Reka and Ovče Polje, the *kazas* of Kriva Palanka and Kumanovo – strategically vital for the organisations in the Kosovo *Vilayet* – faced violence. In addition to the murders of prominent individuals, Chetniks and *comitadji* mutually burned houses and even entire quarters in the villages of Stepance, Jačince, Strezovce, Koince, Makreš, Veternica, Orah, Skačkovce, Murgaš, Pelince, Čelopek, and Cvilance.³⁴

In the second half of 1906, *comitadji* bands near Kumanovo, with the aim of intimidation, burned nine houses in Štalkovica, five in Dovezence, and four in Beljakovce. It is known that in the first case, the affected inhabitants received financial aid from the Serbian Consulate in Skopje and the Circle of Serbian Sisters through the collection of voluntary contributions. This timely material support helped maintain these villages' allegiance to the SCO. There was also retaliation; in October, Vojvoda Đorđe Skopljanče set fire to the Exarchate quarter in Beljakovac. The spiral of violence continued in December, with the *comitadji* burning two barns in Dovezence and one livestock shed in Jačince, while the Chetniks responded by setting fire to thirteen houses and three barns in Kanarevo and Mlado Nagoričane. Due to the unfavourable foreign-policy situation, the threat of war with Bulgaria, and the unpopularity of such actions, the Serbian state leadership repeatedly ordered a halt to arson and killings in the following year. Instead, the focus shifted to blockading settlements and taking hostages as "milder" methods of coercion.

Such conduct continued until the end of 1907. A new wave of arson, as a form of retaliation for a change in *millet* allegiance, erupted in the first half of November,

33 DSPKS, II-d3, No. 55, 218.

34 DAS, KB, PP, 1902, r. 14; 1905, r. 13; DSPKS, II-d1, No. 381–82, 386, 452–53, 458. Pejčić, *Četnički pokret*, 74–75. Simeonov, "Struktura, metodi i zhertvi na srabskata vaorazhena propaganda." *Šešum, Srpska četnička akcija*, 209–10.

affecting the Exarchate village of Stracin near Kratovo (18 houses) and the Patriarchate villages of Gradec and Kiselica near Kriva Palanka. Neither the renewed burning of Stracin, in which eleven houses were destroyed, nor the burning of the “disloyal” Gradec in May of the following year, succeeded in bringing these settlements over to the SCO. On the contrary, these acts merely added fuel to the flames. The outbreak of war between Serbia and Bulgaria was even expected, prompting the authorities in Belgrade to demand the cessation of all offensive activities and to punish the responsible *vojvodas*.³⁵

The destruction of property as a method of economic pressure to enforce a specific national affiliation was also used in Western Povardarie. It is documented that, at the end of 1904, the *comitadji* burned the hay belonging to a certain Tale Stanković from Vrbjani. In September of the following year, the *cheta* of Trajko from Brvnik set fire to twelve houses in the village of Makovo near Prilep, in retaliation for its acceptance of the SCO and the Rum *millet*. Eight days later, the *comitadji* set alight two houses belonging to declared Serbs in Karbunica near Kičevo, which led the village to capitulate and adopt an Exarchate affiliation. By the end of 1905, Serbian *chetas* in Western Povardarie ceased chasing the *comitadji* and instead concentrated on protecting settlements from arson. They failed to do so in the village of Omorani near Veles, where the house of the village schoolteacher was burned. The *comitadji* fared much worse in August 1906 when they attempted to burn alive the priest of the village of Krapa. The well-armed villagers repelled the attack, and the remaining fighters fell into a Chetnik ambush; the burning of Father Tasa’s house and one other dwelling, together with two barns, was the only outcome of the action. In Drimkol, during the summer of 1906, Chetniks under the leadership of Vasilije Trbić set fire to several haystacks and a livestock shed in the Exarchate village of Vevčani.³⁶

This was not the end. The turn of the year brought a renewed escalation of mutual arson attacks. In December 1906, the *comitadji* set fire to several houses and agricultural buildings in Stepanci, a village in the Veles region that had recently come under the Patriarchate’s influence. Three months later, in the same area, Rudnik suffered at the hands of the *comitadji*: no fewer than twenty-five houses and eighteen agricultural buildings were burned. In the period that followed, buildings in Košino, Smilovac (ten houses and sixteen agricultural buildings), and Nikodim were likewise not spared from retaliatory *comitadji* raids. Assistance to Rudnik and Smilovac, and possibly other settlements, as in the previously mentioned case of Štalkovica, was provided by the Society of Serbian Brethren and the Circle of Serbian Sisters. On the other side, during their attack on Izvor in April 1907, the Chetniks burned several houses and out-buildings. That action, combined with taking hostages, led the villagers to accept the

35 DSPKS, II-d2, No. 181, 187, 214, 217, 239, 256, 263; II-d3, No. 11–12, 16, 184, 198, 231–32, 277; III-d, No. 87, 93–94, 96–98, 102–03, 105–07, 109, 110, 113, 123. Ilić, *Srpska četnička akcija*, 102. Simeonov, “Struktura, metodi i žertvi na srbskatska vaorazhena propaganda.” Šešum, *Srpska četnička akcija*, 270–73, 293, 297–303, 322–23, 325, 349–53.

36 DAS, KB, PP, 1905, r. 13; DSPKS, II-d2, No. 148, 150. Ilić, *Srpska četnička akcija*, 94. Šešum, *Srpska četnička akcija*, 222–23, 230, 234–35, 263–64.

Patriarchate. Even new orders from Belgrade to prevent killings and arson could not be fully enforced under the turbulent ground conditions. At the end of the following month, the Chetniks burned three houses in Oreovac but also succeeded in preventing the *comitadji* from setting fire to the nearly captured village of Krstec. The destruction by fire of an entire quarter, comprising nine houses and several agricultural buildings, also took place during what was regarded as the most significant victory of the entire Chetnik campaign. “The Serbian trumpet sounded, Drenovo village was aflame”, as recorded in the original version of the song *Sprem'te se, sprem'te, četnici (Get Ready, Get Ready, Chetniks)*.³⁷

The confiscation of both small and large livestock was also used as a means of applying pressure to induce a change of allegiance. Serbian *chetas* often seized animals, returning them once a village had declared for their side. This happened, for example, with more than 250 sheep from the Kumanovo village of Koince, as well as six sheep and two oxen in Kanarevo, near Kriva Palanka, during the winter of 1905–1906. A year later, Vojvoda Skopljanče, as a reprisal for the theft of sheep from Serbian villages, once again took around 300 sheep from Kanarevo, among other places. When the inhabitants of the village of Podrži Konj in the same region joined the SCO, 214 sheep and lambs were returned to them. Sheep were also seized in Gradec (80), Psača (40), and Orah (150). During these operations, certain *vojvodas* committed abuses; even after villages had changed their allegiance, they failed to return the livestock to its rightful owners. In some cases, Exarchist villages were deliberately raided for theft, with the animals subsequently sold for personal gain. As a result of such misconduct, in August 1906, the organisation dismissed a Chetnik named Sima Stevanović, had him imprisoned, and demanded the “most severe punishment”. For the same reason, the following year Vojvoda Spasa Garda and the head of the Mountain Headquarters, Džervinac, were removed from their positions. The latter had sold no fewer than 268 head of small livestock, four horses, and two she-donkeys.³⁸

The Perilous Trade

A significant instrument of economic struggle to attain national objectives was the boycott of goods made by members of the rival group. This was also meant to worsen the material conditions of the rural population in specific regions, thereby forcing them to declare allegiance to a particular *millet* and revolutionary organisation. Once the SCO had built a strong network in the Kumanovo region, it almost immediately began to implement the boycott as a form of “honourable economic struggle”. From 1905, peasants from Patriarchist villages, making up about two-thirds of the total

37 DSPKS, II-d3, No. 98, 102, 106–07, 170, 186, 212, 225–26, 231. Ilić, *Srpska četnička akcija*, 119. Pejić, *Četnički pokret*, 82–84. Simeonov, “Struktura, metodi i zhertvi na srabskata vaorazhena propaganda.” Šešum, *Srpska četnička akcija*, 290–91, 293, 303, 305, 307–11, 314, 332–33.

38 DAS, KB, PP, 1905, r. 13; DSPKS, II-d1, No. 356; II-d2, No. 16, 142, 181, 243; II-d3, No. 9, 23, 26, 51, 58, 230, 292. Simeonov, “Struktura, metodi i zhertvi na srabskata vaorazhena propaganda.” Šešum, *Srpska četnička akcija*, 270–72.

Christian population of the Ottoman Kumanovo *Kaza*, were instructed not to buy goods from Exarchate traders and craftsmen in the town. Disobedience was met with prescribed penalties: the first breach required payment of one gold coin (lira); the second resulted in corporal punishment; and a third offence carried a death sentence. The effects were soon felt. Many Exarchate traders and craftsmen in Kumanovo were forced to close their shops, while their Patriarchist counterparts, initially only a third of the total in these trades, found themselves in urgent need of additional labour on market days. About thirty Exarchate households, under pressure from the boycott, even petitioned the Ottoman authorities for permission to convert to Uniatism! Methods of economic pressure against Bulgarian traders were also employed in Skopje, where, from March 1907, the Patriarchists ceased purchasing their products.³⁹

The opposing side, it must be noted, also provided reasons for enforcing boycotts. Reliable historical sources indicate that, during 1904, the inhabitants of the pro-Serbian region of Poreče were barred from attending the market in Prilep and threatened with punishment if they travelled to Skopje unless they agreed to bring their villages under the jurisdiction of the Exarchate. Their difficulties are exemplified by the case of a certain *comitadji*, Vasil, who, unlike his comrades, encouraged the peasants of Poreče in autumn 1905 not to fear but to attend the market in Skopje. In response to the actions of the SCO and the strengthening of its position, an economic boycott of Patriarchist peasants, craftsmen, and traders was imposed in Kratovo and Kriva Palanka regions. During August and September 1905, this measure was enforced by the *comitadji vojvodas* Damjan Gruev and Jordan Spasov. A similar practice was applied in Veles, where Exarchists refused to sell bread and other provisions to the Serbian-aligned population and institutions.⁴⁰

In the mountainous regions, where the SMARO/IMARO had no bands at its disposal, such as the Babuna district around Prilep, even harsher measures were employed. Between 1904 and 1906, the city-based Bulgarian committee carried out physical attacks on inhabitants of Serbian-aligned villages who attended the town market or were returning from it. Some victims sustained serious injuries, and four murders were recorded, one of which involved a boy. To illustrate the subsequent spiral of violence, one can cite an example of the SCO's response. During a wedding in Sarandinovo, when guests arrived to collect the bride from the partially Exarchate-aligned village of Krivogaštani, Serbian *chetas* captured ten supporters of the committee and subsequently executed them. Following this, attacks on Serbian peasants travelling to the Prilep market temporarily ceased.⁴¹

Violence was not the only issue. The opposing side, mainly in Prilep, practised a boycott of goods sold to the Serbian population. To ease the difficult situation faced

39 DSPKS, II-d1, No. 183; II-d3, No. 96, 200. Vučetić, "Sećanja Antonija Todorovića," 281–82, 288. Stanislav Krakov, *Plamen četništva* (Beograd: KIZ "Hipnos", 1990), 182. Simeonov, "Struktura, metodi i zhertvi na srbskata vaorazhena propaganda." Šešum, "Srpska četnička organizacija," 253.

40 DSPKS, II-d1, No. 53–54. Vučetić, "Sećanja Antonija Todorovića," 282. Šešum, *Srpska četnička akcija*, 205.

41 DSPKS, I-3/II, 1108–13; II-d2, No. 125, 127. Ilić, *Srpska četnička akcija*, 103, 104. Šešum, *Srpska četnička akcija*, 226.

by the Patriarchists, the SCO brought a merchant, Stevan Sekulić, from Prizren to the town and helped him open a shop. Serbian peasants from the Prilep area and Poreče traded there. Sekulić's safety was also considered: a Turkish man, described as "a well-known villain", was employed as his bodyguard and constant companion. He openly threatened that, for "master Stevan", he would kill at least ten Bulgarian-aligned merchants. The measure proved effective. Sekulić kept his shop in Prilep until the outbreak of the Young Turk Revolution.⁴² Besides shops aligned with the Serbian side, the *vojvodas* advised peasants from Patriarchist villages that, when travelling to Prilep, Kičevo, Skopje, or other towns, to stay with Serbian innkeepers. One such host, in the Skopje village of Sopište, during the Bulgarian terror at the beginning of 1907, paid for his loyalty with his life and that of his closest family members.⁴³

The expansion of the SCO and the incorporation of several settlements around Prilep during 1906 prompted IMARO to launch a new wave of terror, during which two individuals were killed, and an attempt was made on the life of another prominent Serb. The newly aligned communities on the Serbian side could not access Prilep, which they were economically dependent on. This provoked a severe retaliatory action by the Chetniks. Among other measures, near the mountain peak of Zlatovrh, they set up an ambush and captured Exarchate-aligned villagers returning from the market in Prilep. Those whose innocence was established were released, while the remainder, around ten individuals, were executed.

The following year, as mentioned, the Chetniks cleverly attacked and seized the village of Izvor, the final location needed to establish complete control over the communication route between Prilep and Veles. This allowed them to impose an economic blockade on the Exarchate population in both locations, thereby applying pressure to join the Patriarchate. Economic pressure measures in Eastern Povardarje at the end of 1906 similarly involved restricting movement. Chetniks blocked certain villages, cutting off their trade links with nearby towns and forcing them to return to the Patriarchate. The final phase, after completing the network in the rural areas of Eastern and Western Povardarje, was intended as an economic strike against the towns. Through organised peasants, the boycott of the Exarchate and the promotion of the material success of Patriarchate traders and craftsmen under the leadership of the SCO aimed to influence a change of allegiance and to win over, primarily, the two "Bulgarian" towns of Skopje and Veles.⁴⁴

Before the establishment of the Serbian Chetnik Organisation and during its first two years of activity, the Exarchate-aligned committee group – traditionally stronger and dominant in the towns – managed to coerce some Serbian-aligned villages around Skopje, Kumanovo, Kriva Palanka, Veles, and Prilep into accepting the religious authority of the Bulgarian Exarchate and the committee organisation by closing the

42 DSPKS, II-d1, No. 47. Vučetić, "Sećanja Antonija Todorovića," 282.

43 DSPKS, II-d2, No. 127; II-d3, No. 28. Simeonov, "Struktura, metodi i zhertvi na srabskata vaorazhena propaganda." Šešum, *Srpska četnička akcija*, 303, 348.

44 DSPKS, II-d2, No. 231, 235, 243, 263; II-d3, No. 226; III-d, No. 43. Ilić, *Srpska četnička akcija*, 103–04. Simeonov, "Struktura, metodi i zhertvi na srabskata vaorazhena propaganda." Šešum, *Srpska četnička akcija*, 282–83, 290–91.

town markets to them. Simultaneously, villages under the Exarchate were warned that switching allegiance to the Serbs would lead to an economic boycott. The expansion of the SCO into more villages around these towns allowed it, through orders to peasants to boycott Exarchate traders and craftsmen, to encourage the latter to abandon the Exarchate and align with the Patriarchate's religious authority and the Serbian side. Consequently, measures of economic boycott were used as pressure on both buyers and sellers, with each organisation exercising influence over one or the other depending on which group it controlled.

Conclusion

The Serbian Chetnik Organisation, along with its rival, the Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation, employed measures that can be characterised as a form of economic nationalism, depending on their strength and resources. Unlike the *comitadji*, who aimed to be as economically independent from Bulgaria as possible by levying taxes on the population for revolutionary purposes, the SCO did not, except in cases of abuse or to procure arms in specific settlements, demand money from the local population. This gave it a significant advantage over its opponent. Furthermore, it long avoided killing the leaders of Exarchate-aligned villages to force their neighbours to abandon the committee and join the SCO. Instead of murder, it more frequently seized livestock, returning it only if the villagers switched allegiance, or burnt economic buildings and houses.

The pressure on seasonal workers (*pečalbari*), who supported their families in the Kosovo and Bitola vilayets by working in Serbia and Bulgaria, was exerted by the authorities of both states. This measure forced the seasonal labourers to choose between the risk of death by starvation or retaliation from the national-revolutionary bands, and, depending on which danger was more immediate, it met with varying degrees of success. Economic boycott also served as a tool of coercion. The *comitadji*, aligned with the Exarchate, forbade merchants and craftsmen from selling goods to peasants from Serbian-aligned settlements, while the Serbian side prohibited peasants from purchasing from Exarchate traders and artisans. The effectiveness of these measures also varied according to the balance of power on the ground.

In the struggle between Serbia and Bulgaria to build the broadest possible base of supporters for Serbian and Bulgarian national allegiance among Orthodox Slavs in the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century, every available method was employed, including economic measures. Economic pressure constituted an important instrument in this struggle, and this study aims to examine it as thoroughly as possible.

The height of the mutual (by then national, struggle between opposing groups within the Ottoman Empire was reached with the Young Turk Revolution of 1908. At that time, the new authorities recognised all revolutionary organisations and granted

amnesty to those involved in armed actions. Alongside the end of physical violence, economic pressure on the population to support one side or the other also ceased. From that point until the end of Ottoman rule in the region, inhabitants were free to choose their church/national affiliation and political alignment.

Acknowledgement

The realisation of this research was financially supported by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia as part of the funding of scientific research at the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Philosophy (contract number 451-03-33/2026-03/200163).

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 - MID – Ministarstvo inostranih dela Kraljevine Srbije:
 - KB – Konzulat u Bitolju:
 - PP – Političko-prosvetno odeljenje.

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**EKONOMSKI UKREPI V DELOVANJU
SRBSKE ČETNIŠKE ORGANIZACIJE
V KOSOVSKEM IN BITOLSKEM VILAJETU 1904–1908:
ŠTUDIJA PRIMERA**

POVZETEK

Boj za pridobitev Slovanov, pravoslavnih podanikov Osmanskega cesarstva, za nacionalne cilje Srbije in Bolgarije se je začel v zadnjih desetletjih 19. stoletja. Bolgarija je od leta 1878, ob ponovnem vzpostavljanju kot (avtonomna) država, imela prednost, saj je v Osmanskem cesarstvu od leta 1870 obstajala priznana verska organizacija – Bolgarska ekzarhija, medtem ko je srbska stran morala delovati prek institucij Vaseljenske patriarhije. Boj za naklonjenost pravoslavnih Slovanov se je do zadnjega desetletja 19. stoletja kazal predvsem skozi tekmovanje za dominacijo preko izobraževanja, z odpiranjem šol s srbskim ali bolgarskim poukom. Boj je dobil agresivno obliko leta 1897 proti Srbom in slovanskim patriarhistom v Bitolskem in Solunskem vilajetu ter južnem delu Kosovskega vilajeta. Takrat je MRO, revolucionarna organizacija, ki se je od ustanovitve leta 1894 načeloma borila za avtonomijo Makedonije in edrenskega območja, vendar je uporabljala logistično in finančno pomoč Bolgarije ter združevala ekzarhiste, nastopala predvsem proti izobraževalnemu gibanju Srbov in Grkov, ki ga je označevala kot nacionalno propagando.

Do leta 1904 je srbska stran končno ustanovila Srbsko četniško organizacijo v srbskih naseljih južnega dela Kosovskega in Bitolskega vilajeta, po vzoru tekmovalne organizacije (TMORO). Od pomladi 1905 sta si ti dve organizaciji odprto nasprotovali in si z uporabo groženj, umorov, uničenja premoženja ter različnimi oblikami ekonomskega pritiska na pravoslavno slovansko prebivalstvo prizadevali, da vasi in mestne četrti zadržijo v svojih vrstah ali jih prevzamejo od druge organizacije. Glavna naloga čet obeh organizacij je bila, da porazijo, uničijo ali preženejo nasprotnike ter

v svojo organizacijsko in versko strukturo vključijo vasi in mestne četrti, poseljene s pravoslavni Slovani. Pravzaprav je šlo za boj za omejevanje interesnih sfer Srbije in Bolgarije v Osmanskem cesarstvu oziroma za dominacijo nad čim širšim območjem.

Tako ena kot druga organizacija, odvisno od moči in zmogljivosti, je uporabljala ukrepe, ki jih je mogoče označiti kot oblike ekonomskega nacionalizma. Za razliko od komitske organizacije, ki je z obdavčevanjem prebivalcev za revolucionarne cilje poskušala biti čim bolj ekonomsko neodvisna od Bolgarije, četniška organizacija, razen v primerih zlorab ali za nabavo orožja v posameznih naseljih, ni zahtevala denarja od prebivalstva. To ji je dajalo prednost pred nasprotnikom. Prav tako se je dolgo časa izogibala umorom vodij ekzarhističnih naselij, da bi s tem prisilila njihove sosede, da zapustijo komitsko stran in se pridružijo Srbski četniški organizaciji. Namesto umorov so pogosteje uporabljali zaplembo živine, pogojujoč njeno vrnitev s prehodom k Srbom, ali požig gospodarskih stavb in hiš.

Pritisk na sezonske delavce (pečalbare), ki so preživljali družine v Kosovskem in Bitolskem vilajetu z delom v Srbiji in Bolgariji, so izvajale oblasti obeh držav. To sredstvo je sezonske delavce prisililo, da so izbirali med tveganjem smrti zaradi lakote ali maščevanjem nacionalno-revolucionarnih čet, in je glede na prevlado ene ali druge nevarnosti imelo manj ali več uspeha. Ekonomski bojkot je prav tako predstavljal sredstvo pritiska. Komitska, ekzarhistična stran je prepovedovala trgovcem in obrtnikom, da prodajajo blago kmetom v srbskih naseljih, srbska stran pa je prepovedala, da kmetje kupujejo pri trgovcih in obrtnikih ekzarhistov. Ti ukrepi so bili bolj ali manj uspešni, odvisno od razmerja moči na terenu.

V boju Srbije in Bolgarije za vzpostavitev čim širše baze privržencev za srbsko in bolgarsko nacionalno opredelitev med pravoslavni Slovani v Osmanskem cesarstvu na začetku 20. stoletja so bila torej uporabljena vsa razpoložljiva sredstva, vključno z ekonomskimi. Ekonomski pritisk je predstavljal pomembno orodje v tem boju, pričujoči prispevek pa predstavlja poskus, da se ta čim celoviteje osvetli.

Vrh medsebojnega, do takrat nacionalnega boja med nasprotnimi skupinami v Osmanskem cesarstvu je bil dosežen z mladoturško revolucijo leta 1908. Takrat so nove oblasti priznale vse revolucionarne organizacije in podelile amnestijo udeležencem oboroženih akcij. Poleg prenehanja fizičnega nasilja je prenehal tudi ekonomski pritisk na prebivalstvo, da se opredeli za eno ali drugo skupino. Od tega trenutka do konca osmanske oblasti v regiji so prebivalci svobodno izbirali cerkveno/nacionalno pripadnost in politično usmeritev.