

Russia's Balkan entanglements  
1806–1914

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## Rights and obligations acquired: The advance to the Black Sea, the Danubian Principalities, and the Serbian revolution



During the eighteenth century, a period when its prime attention had of necessity to be directed toward events in Central and Western Europe, the Russian state nevertheless acquired extensive territories to the south and came to share with the Ottoman Empire control of the Black Sea. In 1783 the Crimea was annexed and Georgia came under Russian protection. During the wars of the French revolution and Napoleon, the advance was continued. In 1812 in the Treaty of Bucharest Russia received Bessarabia and control of the navigable channel of the mouth of the Danube. The forward policy in the Caucasus was continued during the reigns of Paul and Alexander I. After wars with Persia (1804–13) and with the Ottoman Empire (1806–12), Russia forced these two states to accept its Caucasian conquests.

Russia, firmly entrenched on the Black Sea coast, found its position in the Near East buttressed by the settlement negotiated in Vienna in 1815 that restored the European balance of power temporarily disrupted by the Napoleonic conquests. During the next decades Russian security was ensured not only by its dominant military power but also by its alliance with its conservative neighbors, Austria and Prussia. With their common policy of the defense of the territorial and political status quo established in 1815, the three states, by cooperating, ensured a long period of peace in Central Europe. The weak point in the relationship was to be the conflicting aims of Russia and Austria in the Balkan peninsula, where by 1815 the Orthodox empire had assumed binding connections and obligations, both in its own interests and ultimately to the advantage of the Christian population.

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Russian involvement in and penetration of the Balkan peninsula commenced with the reign of Peter the Great at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Although Peter did indeed call upon the Balkan Christians to rise in support of his army, the emphasis in Russian policy at this time and throughout the eighteenth century was on strategic concerns. During the next years when Peter's successors continued his policy of expansion southward, Russia usually acted with the Habsburg Empire, which had a similar interest in weakening Ottoman power. This cooperation resulted in significant Russian gains. Although a war waged in alliance with Austria in 1736-9 brought meager results, the conflict of 1768-74 was concluded by the extremely advantageous Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji. During these wars the Russian government established direct relations with three Balkan peoples: the Romanians of the Danubian Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia; the Serbs, in particular during the Napoleonic period; and the Greeks, whose national development will be discussed in a later chapter. Of first importance were the connections developed with the Danubian Principalities because of their prime strategic position in the wars with the Ottoman Empire. Relations with these provinces were intimately interwoven into the successive conflicts with the Russian Ottoman neighbor and with France.

### THE DANUBIAN PRINCIPALITIES; THE RUSSO-TURKISH WAR, 1806-12

Russia first became involved in the affairs of these provinces during the reign of Peter the Great. At this time the Danubian Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia were separate states, enjoying an autonomous position under native princes. Despite their rights of self-government, their rulers were naturally tempted to use any opportunity to break away from the declining Ottoman Empire. In April 1711 Peter made an agreement with the Moldavian prince, Dimitrie Cantemir, that assured him of local support. In July, however, Peter was defeated and both provinces were subsequently brought more firmly under Ottoman control. The princes were henceforth appointed from prominent Greek families, usually associated with the Phanar district of Constantinople.<sup>1</sup> The Phanariot period in Romanian history brought extreme economic pressure on the native

<sup>1</sup>The Ottoman government regularly appointed Greek officials to high state posts. Since many of them lived in the Phanar district of Constantinople, which was also the residence of the patriarch, this group was known collectively as *Phanariots*.

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population and political turmoil. Despite the unfortunate beginning of the association, the Russian government retained its interest in the fate of the Principalities; these lands, after all, lay on the direct route to Constantinople. They were important as staging areas from which to launch attacks on the Ottoman Empire and as a source of supplies for the army. In the period from 1711 to 1812 Russia and the Ottoman Empire engaged in five wars, with much of the fighting carried on in the Principalities.

Although Russian troops occupied Moldavia in 1736 in the course of another war with the Ottoman Empire, it was not until the accession of Catherine the Great in 1762 that political intervention was inaugurated. After warfare was resumed in 1768, Russian armies again entered the Principalities and a fleet was sent from the Baltic to the eastern Mediterranean. In both areas the Russian government called for the assistance of the Christian population against the Porte.<sup>2</sup> Russian agents were successful in promoting a local uprising in the Peloponnesus in 1769, but it was suppressed with little difficulty. In the Principalities the native aristocracy, the boyars, cooperated with the Russian officials with the hope that they could improve their political position, perhaps even win their independence. Although these desires were not fulfilled, the peace brought certain improvements in their status.

The Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji, signed in 1774, is the most important document for the subsequent history of Russian-Balkan relations.<sup>3</sup> Since its text specifically called for the annulment of all previous agreements, it is the starting point for the establishment of the Ottoman treaty obligations toward Russia that were to be so important for the future. The agreement, in addition to the section on the Principalities, dealt with the major issues in contention between the signatories. Of direct advantage to Russia was the Ottoman cession of the lands between the Bug and Dniester rivers and Caucasian territory; the Crimea was also declared independent. In addition, Russian ships were to have the right to sail freely in the Black Sea and through the Straits, and Russian merchants were to

<sup>2</sup>The term *Porte* or *Sublime Porte* was used in European diplomatic correspondence to designate the Ottoman government. Specifically, it referred to the building in Constantinople containing the principal Ottoman offices of state.

<sup>3</sup>An English translation and a discussion of the treaty can be found in Thomas Erskine Holland, *A Lecture on the Treaty Relations of Russia and Turkey from 1774 to 1853* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1877). The text is printed on pp. 36-55. See also E. I. Druzhinina, *Kiuchuk-Kainardzhiiskii mir 1774 goda* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSR, 1955).



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enjoy the same commercial privileges that had previously been granted to France and Britain. The Russian government could also appoint consuls in the major Ottoman cities. For Russian relations with the Balkan Orthodox the significant section of the treaty was Article VII, which gave St. Petersburg certain vaguely defined rights in connection with these people. Because of the importance that the controversial nature of this article assumed in future European diplomacy, it is quoted in full.

The Sublime Porte promises to protect constantly the Christian religion and its churches, and it also allows the Ministers of the Imperial Court of Russia to make, upon all occasions, representations, as well in favour of the new church at Constantinople, of which mention will be made in Article XIV, as on behalf of its officiating ministers, promising to take such representations into due consideration, as being made by a confidential functionary of a neighbouring and sincerely friendly Power.

Henceforth, the Russian government repeatedly cited this section of the treaty to justify its intervention in the affairs of the Ottoman Balkan Christians. Confusion existed over the exact interpretation of this article, in particular over the question of what response the Russian diplomats were entitled to make should the Ottoman government not live up to its promise "to protect constantly the Christian religion and its churches."

Other sections of the treaty referred specifically to the Greek and Romanian lands whose inhabitants had been involved in the war. In regard to the islands of the Greek Archipelago, the Ottoman government in the second of the five sections of Article XVII agreed:

That the Christian religion shall not be exposed to the least oppression any more than its churches, and that no obstacle shall be opposed to the erection or repair of them; and also that the officiating ministers shall neither be oppressed nor insulted.

Article XVI reflected the enormous Russian interest in the Principalities. Of the ten points in this section, the most important was the last:

The Porte likewise permits that, according as the circumstances of these two Principalities may require, the Ministers of the Imperial Court of Russia resident at Constantinople may remonstrate in their favour, and promises to listen to them with all the attention that is due to friendly and respected Powers.

This article also provided for amnesty for those who had joined the Russian forces, tax relief, permission for emigration, and the free

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exercise of the Orthodox religion. The princes were allowed to send accredited representatives to Constantinople.

The treaty, which thus gave Russia specific rights of intervention, preceded a period during which the Porte, acting with St. Petersburg, issued a series of declarations and made agreements that widened considerably both the autonomous rights of the Principalities and the Russian supervision. In September 1787, Russia, joined later by Austria, once again went to war against the Ottoman Empire, with the principal objective of obtaining an extension of territory and perhaps the creation of an independent Romanian buffer state. Other European events, however, forced Catherine to make peace before a decisive military victory could be achieved. The Treaty of Jassy (Iași) of 1792 did, nevertheless, allow Russia to annex the lands between the Bug and Dniester rivers, a change that made it a neighbor to Moldavia. No alteration was made in the conditions pertaining to the Principalities.

During Catherine's reign these provinces had an important place in the various partition schemes considered at this time. Among these the so-called Greek Project has received the most attention. This plan was developed in an exchange of letters between the empress and Joseph II of Austria in 1782. In this division of the Ottoman Empire Russia was to annex directly Black Sea and Caucasian lands; Austria was to obtain Oltenia (western Wallachia), Bosnia, Hercegovina, Istria, Dalmatia, and part of Serbia. In addition to the territorial acquisitions, Russia was to benefit from the establishment of two puppet kingdoms: a resurrected Byzantine state, which was to include Bulgarian, Greek, and Macedonian lands and be ruled by Catherine's grandson; and a Romanian kingdom, called Dacia, to be composed of Wallachia, Moldavia, and Bessarabia, and given an Orthodox prince. Venice, although surrendering Istria and Dalmatia, was to be compensated with Crete, Cyprus, and the Peloponnesus. France would receive Syria and Egypt. Although the plan was never carried through, certain aspects were to reappear in other partition discussions. The acquisition of the Principalities, either as part of a partition scheme or a direct understanding with the Ottoman Empire, remained a possible Russian alternative policy until 1812.

Before her death in 1796 Catherine was not able to realize her most ambitious projects. Her son Paul, on his accession, reversed the expansionist policy of his mother and attempted instead to seek an accommodation with the Porte with the aim of replacing France as

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the predominant influence in Constantinople. This goal, which included the maintenance of Ottoman territorial integrity, was also to become one of the possible solutions to Russia's involvement in the area in the future. During Paul's reign, however, Balkan and Eastern affairs became almost a sideshow in comparison with the events taking place elsewhere in Europe. Nevertheless, when Napoleon in 1798 first took Malta and then invaded Egypt, the area became again a war arena. With France now the main menace to its interests, the Ottoman government in 1799 negotiated a treaty with Russia containing a secret clause that allowed the Russian fleet to pass freely through the Straits of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles during the war. Previously, it had been the established Ottoman policy to close the Straits to foreign ships of war. At the same time a joint Russian-Ottoman expedition captured the Ionian Islands from France. The two allied powers then established the autonomous Septinsular Republic under Ottoman sovereignty but Russian protection.

In March 1801 Alexander I succeeded his father. Through the first years of his reign, he continued the policy of cooperation with the Ottoman Empire. Russia made peace with France in 1801, followed by a similar action by the Porte in the next year. Although the Ottoman Empire enjoyed a period of peace between 1802 and 1806, it had to face rebellions by local notables (ayans) in various sections of its lands. At this time the most serious action was led by Pasvanoglu Osman Pasha from his center in Vidin on the Danube. His supporters, a collection of bandits, rebellious janissaries, and political opportunists, devastated the surrounding countryside. Wallachia was severely affected. In this period of continued Ottoman domestic turmoil the Russian government, although still seeking to maintain the empire's territorial integrity, was able to increase its treaty rights in regard to the internal affairs of the Principalities. In 1802 the Porte issued an imperial decree confirming and widening the privileges of the provinces. The princes, chosen for a term of seven years, could be appointed and removed only with Russian approval. Article IV directed them "to take into consideration the representations that the Russian envoy will make to them."<sup>4</sup> Other documents enlarged and defined previous enactments in the same direction of

<sup>4</sup>Dimitri A. Sturdza et al., *Acte și documente relative la istoria renascerei României* (Bucharest: Carol Göbl, 1900), I, pp. 259–63.

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increasing the autonomy of the Principalities in regard to the Porte but enlarging Russian rights of intervention.

These agreements were to be the direct cause of the next conflict between Russia and the Ottoman Empire. In 1805 Russia and France were again at war. In 1806 the Ottoman government, at this time with good relations with France, removed the princes of Wallachia and Moldavia, who were Russian candidates. Although the Porte almost at once reversed its decision, Russian troops were sent into the Principalities. This action, which we will see repeated in other crises between the two states in the future, was naturally regarded as an act of war by the sovereign power; a formal declaration was issued in December. Russia was thus drawn into a major conflict as a direct result of its agreements in regard to a Balkan people. Of course, the war also involved issues connected with the Russian relationship with France.

Until 1812 the Russian objectives included not only the annexation of the Principalities, but wider goals as well. In his conversations with Napoleon at Tilsit in 1807 Alexander I also discussed the question of the partition of Ottoman lands, although no decisions were reached. However, during a meeting at Erfurt held the next year, it was agreed that Russia would annex the Principalities. From 1807 to 1812 peace negotiations were carried on, which failed largely because the Porte would not cede the provinces. In 1811, faced with a breakdown in its relations with France, the Russian government reduced its demands to the acquisition of Moldavia. Finally, in May 1812 the two powers signed the Treaty of Bucharest. Article IV gave Moldavian territory to the Pruth River to Russia, a cession that left the vital Kilia Channel at the mouth of the Danube River in Russian hands. Article V provided for the reconfirmation of the previous agreements concerning the privileges of the two provinces, that is, the treaties of Kuchuk Kainardji and Jassy, as well as the agreement of 1802. It also made provision for the payment of taxes and tribute. Thus, except for the loss of the Bessarabian territory, the Principalities remained, as before, under Ottoman suzerainty and Russian protection.

From 1806 until 1812, when the Russian army was withdrawn to meet the French invasion, Russian officials were in control of the Principalities. One of their chief objectives was to secure supplies for the support of their troops. Since these were often obtained by violent methods, the Russian occupation became increasingly resented by the population. The costs of the occupation also had to be paid, so that, as an authority on the question has written, "during

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the war more than half of the Principalities' income went to supply the Russian army. . . . By the end of 1809 almost all of the working cattle and wagons in the Principalities were being used to move supplies for the army."<sup>5</sup>

After 1812, even with the departure of the Russian army, the situation remained difficult. The provinces had been impoverished by the war and the costs of occupation. Moreover, the region was now returned to the control of Phanariot rulers, who continued their previous extortionate policies. In this period the animosity of the native Romanian leadership turned chiefly against the Phanariot princes and their Russian backers; the peasants, who paid the costs of the oppressive political conditions, resented chiefly the social and economic burdens under which they were placed.

In their attitude toward the Principalities, as we have seen, Russian officials during the reigns of Catherine, Paul, and Alexander I adopted varying policies ranging from the direct annexation of the provinces to the control of them through agreements with the Porte. To justify their attempts at domination, they often spoke about Ottoman oppression and the need to protect Orthodox Christians. In fact, the Principalities were, at least in a juridical sense, autonomous; an Ottoman administrative system was not in place, nor was an Ottoman army in occupation except in time of war. Political oppression resulted from the policies of the Orthodox Christian Phanariot princes, who were, of course, appointed by the Ottoman Empire but who were responsible for the internal conditions in the country.

Despite its deep involvement in the affairs of the Principalities, the Russian government did not have to face a native national movement or the issue of the establishment of an independent Balkan state. Both of these elements were to arise in connection with the Serbian revolution, the first genuine national revolt with which Russia had to deal. Because of its significance, the Russian relationship with this revolution will be examined in detail. Although this revolt did not draw Russia into war, it nevertheless resulted in the negotiation of treaty obligations in 1812 and the acquisition by the Russian government of rights and obligations toward another Balkan people. It also led to the establishment of a state that was at times in the future to have a very close relationship with St. Petersburg.

<sup>5</sup>George F. Jewsbury, *The Russian Annexation of Bessarabia, 1774-1828: A Study of Imperial Expansion* (Boulder, Colo.: East European Monographs, 1976), p. 52.

## *Rights and obligations acquired*

### THE SERBIAN REVOLUTION

In sharp contrast to the close ties with the Principalities, before the beginning of the nineteenth century there had been few direct links between Russia and the Serbs under Ottoman control.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the chief Russian interest had been shown in the condition of the Serbs of the Habsburg Empire. There, under pressure from the Catholic church, the Orthodox Metropolitanate at Sremski Karlovci had called on Russia for material and spiritual aid. In 1722 Peter the Great directed the Russian synod to respond to this appeal; ecclesiastic establishments in Moscow and Kiev also sent assistance. This cultural influence led to a Russification of the Habsburg Serbian educational and religious institutions. Their literary language became the so-called Slavo-Serbian, deeply influenced by the Russian vocabulary. Despite this relationship with the Habsburg Serbs and the support given to Orthodoxy there, Russian political interest was not extended over the frontier. In fact, throughout the eighteenth century the Russian government usually conceded that Serbia and the western Balkans were within the unofficial Habsburg sphere of influence.

For their part, the Serbian leaders in the Ottoman lands were equally ignorant about Russia. Concerning his mission to St. Petersburg in 1804, the Serbian notable Prota Matija Nenadović wrote:

So went Columbus and his crew on the blue seas to find America and to acquaint it with Europe; so today we are travelling on the quiet Danube to find Russia, about which we know nothing, not even where it is, but have only heard tell of it in our songs, and to acquaint Serbia with Russia!<sup>7</sup>

In discussing Russian relations with the Serbian revolt, it is important to emphasize that, unlike the Principalities, the Serbian lands were under direct Ottoman administration, and they were garrisoned by Ottoman troops. In the eighteenth century, in addi-

<sup>6</sup>The principal documentary collections on the Russian attitude toward the Serbian revolution are *Peruoe serbskoe vosstanie 1804-1813 gg. i Rossiia* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo nauka, 1980, 1983), 2 vols. (cited hereafter as *PSV*) and *Ministerstvo inostrannykh del SSSR, Vneshniaia politika Rossii XIX i nachala XX veka: Dokumenty Rossiiskogo ministerstva inostrannykh del*. (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1960ff) (cited hereafter as *VPR*). See also Lawrence P. Meriage, *Russia and the First Serbian Revolution, 1804-1813* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1987).

<sup>7</sup>Prota Matija Nenadović, *The Memoirs of Prota Matija Nenadović* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 97.

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tion to the control by the suzerain power, the Serbs fell under the influence of the Greeks of Constantinople. In the eighteenth century, along with their political control of the Principalities, Phanariot Greeks were able to obtain strong positions in other sections of the Ottoman Empire. In Serbia they were able to dominate the religious institutions. Most important, in 1766, the Serbian Patriarchate of Peć was abolished and the institutions attached to it were placed under the authority of the Greek-controlled Constantinople Patriarchate. In the next years the Serbian church was Hellenized, with the high offices held by Greeks. This situation resulted in the rise of strong anti-Phanariot feelings in the Serbian lands, which were to last well into the nineteenth century.

As regards the European great powers, the Habsburg Empire had previously exerted the greatest influence in the Serbian lands. Not only had its armies represented a liberating force, but its lands, particularly Croatia-Slavonia and other border districts, held a predominantly South Slav population of Croats, Serbs, and Slovenes. Most important for this narrative was the presence of a concentrated Serbian Orthodox population along the monarchy's southern border. As could be expected, in the long years of warfare many Serbian families fled over the border to escape the Ottoman authorities. The Habsburg government could employ the services of these people. The border areas were difficult to control; brigandage and lawlessness were major problems. To establish settled conditions, the Habsburg authorities formed military colonies consisting primarily of Serbian but also Croatian families. In return for military service the Serbian settlers were guaranteed free exercise of their Orthodox religion and control of their local administration. In 1630 a charter was issued regulating the conditions on the Military Frontier. A large concentration of Serbs thus came to inhabit areas directly adjacent to the Serbian-inhabited lands of the Ottoman Empire.

The Serbian presence in the Habsburg Monarchy was made more significant by the establishment of Orthodox religious centers. In 1689 the patriarch of Peć, Arsenije III Crnojević, called upon the Serbs to rise in support of an invading Austrian army. When the Habsburg forces were compelled to withdraw, Arsenije and about 30,000 families accompanied the army. With Habsburg recognition, they organized a Serbian Orthodox Metropolitanate at Sremski Karlovci. In 1737, as a result of a similar series of events, another patriarch, Arsenije IV, led a similar but smaller migration. The Habsburg Monarchy thus acquired an Orthodox religious center that was to hold both spiritual and secular associations for the Serbs.

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These close ties were to be important at the beginning of the Serbian revolt.

The Serbian revolution, which commenced in early 1804, was not at first a national liberation movement aiming at independence, but rather a revolt of the local notables under their leader, Karadjordje Petrović, against the violent actions of a group of janissaries who were in fact challenging the authority of the sultan. The Serbian goal was the implementation of promises concerning their status that had previously been given by Sultan Selim III. Since they were aware that they needed foreign support, the leaders turned first to the Habsburg Monarchy. The connections with the Habsburg Serbs, the geographic proximity, and the remembrance of the many wars that had been conducted on their territory between the monarchy and the Ottoman Empire led them to hope for assistance. In return, they offered to place their country under the jurisdiction of a Habsburg prince. At this time and throughout the rebellion the Habsburg government, absorbed in the struggle with Napoleon, consistently refused to assume obligations in Serbia, even when it was also urged to act by Russia.

During the first period of the revolution the Serbian aim was a reconciliation with the Porte on the basis of an Ottoman assurance of certain autonomous rights. The first requests for assistance from Russia were for support for this goal. Leontije, the Greek-national metropolitan of Belgrade, hoped to use the offices of the Constantinople Patriarchate to present the Serbian case to the Porte. At the same time, the Russian ambassador at Constantinople, Andrei Iakovlevich Italinskii, who was sympathetic to the Serbian position, was asked to aid in this effort. In May 1804 the first direct appeal was made to St. Petersburg. It took the form of a Serbian petition to the tsar sent through Italinskii; Alexander I was asked to mediate with the Porte to secure for Serbia the same conditions that applied at that time in the Ionian Islands, Moldavia, and Wallachia, that is, local autonomy and Russian protection. Even more important, in September 1804 a three-man delegation, headed by Nenadović, set out from Serbia for St. Petersburg with petitions for the tsar. The stated aim of the mission was to secure Russian intervention to reconcile the Serbs and the Ottoman government. It was emphasized that the revolt was against those who themselves did not obey the sultan; it was not a challenge to the sovereign. The desire was again expressed that Serbia receive a status similar to that of the Ionian Islands; the appointment of a Russian consul in Belgrade was also requested.



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With a preponderant control established in the Principalities and in alliance with the Ottoman Empire, the Russian government was unlikely to regard the Serbian revolt as anything but inconvenient. Without agents in Serbia proper, the Russian officials gained what little information they had about conditions in the country through their agents not only in Constantinople but also in Vienna, Bucharest, and Jassy. The first reports from these sources depicted the uprising as little more than a minor rebellion. The general Russian reaction was thus negative; there was certainly no interest in a weakening of Ottoman control over the region, and concern was shown that the revolt could lead to a general Balkan uprising at a time that was detrimental to Russian interests.

Although the Nenadović mission did not succeed in its basic aims, it did lead to an increase of Russian interest in Serbian conditions and to a few small concessions. At first, the Russian attitude was negative. If there was to be a mediation, the government preferred that Austria act. The Serbian delegation thus received calming advice. Although its members did not see Alexander I, they were received twice by the foreign minister, Prince Adam Czartoryski. He promised to place their petition before the tsar, but he warned that "Serbia and Russia are very far apart and we are in friendship with the Turks."<sup>8</sup> He advised that the Serbs should deal directly with the Porte.

Despite this generally negative reply, Czartoryski recommended to Alexander I that money be sent to the rebels, and he instructed Italinskii to urge the Porte to meet the Serbian requests. The ambassador was to emphasize that the Serbs would be happy to submit to their legitimate monarch. The foreign minister, however, believed that the Ottoman officials should not be informed of the Serbian visit to St. Petersburg; they were already suspicious of Russian intentions and possible connections with the revolt.<sup>9</sup> From this time on the Russian government did send some financial and military assistance, and its intervention at Constantinople increased. It also looked more favorably on the Serbian request for an autonomous status with Russian protection.

In June 1805 another Serbian delegation went to Constantinople, where it stayed at the home of the patriarch.<sup>10</sup> The discussions did

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>9</sup>Czartoryski to Italinskii, January 3/15, 1805; Czartoryski to Italinskii, May 4/16, 1805, *PSV*, I, pp. 80, 119-21.

<sup>10</sup>Italinskii to Czartoryski, no. 147, Buyukdere, June 2/14, 1805, *ibid.*, I, pp. 129-30.