

General Reduction of Taxation.

During 1875 it was evident to the Bucharest Committee that the position of the Ottoman Government was becoming critical, and also that heavy taxation had produced deep discontent among the Bulgarians; accordingly, on the ^{20th February} ~~3rd March~~ last, twenty fresh emissaries were sent into the country to make another attempt to bring about an insurrection. A man of the name of Benkowsky was to take the Sandjak of Philippopolis, while one Vankoff was to proceed to Eski-Zaghra. Their instructions were to appoint sub-Committees of ten in each of the towns and of four in the villages, a condition being made as regards the latter that the priest and schoolmaster should be *ex officio* members. This will explain the active part taken by these two classes of men in the late rising.

The schoolmasters are men who have many of them been educated in Russia, and are a strong example of the truth of the adage that "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing." They have returned to their homes with a smattering of education and a mass of ideas respecting Panslavism in their heads; these ideas they have endeavoured to propagate, and the unfortunate people have now to thank them and their spiritual pastors for a large share of the miseries which have befallen them.

When the sub-Committees were formed they set about collecting money, and up to the ^{19th} ~~21st~~ March 1,450 Turkish pounds had been collected. On the ^{10th} ~~22nd~~ March an emissary was arrested at Sofia, but did not reveal the plans of his comrades. Money was sent to Constantinople and Bucharest for the purchase of arms, but for different reasons the orders were not executed, and the Committee had to content themselves with such old-fashioned and inferior weapons as they could collect in the Province.

On the ^{19th} ~~21st~~ March a meeting of eighty agitators took place at Otlou-keui, and the date of the general rising, which the Bucharest Committee had fixed for ^{18th April} ~~1st May~~, was postponed till after ^{1st} ~~13th~~ May.

The plan of action decided on was shortly as follows:—

To destroy as much of the railway as possible, including the bridge at Ouzoun Keupni.

To burn the rolling stock at Sarenbey.

To set fire to Adrianople in a hundred and to Philippopolis in sixty places, and also to burn Sofia, Tatar-Bazardjik, Tchtiman, Isladi, and a number of villages.

To attack the Turkish and mixed villages, and to kill all Mussulmans who resisted and take their property.

To occupy certain important points, such as Avrat-Alan, Kalofer, Tchoukourlou, &c. Bazardjik to be attacked with 3,000 men, and the Government stores seized.

The rising to be general and simultaneous.

Such Bulgarians as refused to join the insurrection to be forced into it, and their villages burnt.

On the ^{18th April} ~~1st May~~ another meeting was held at Metzka, when Benkowsky informed his comrades that their plans had been betrayed by one Nenko, and that the rising must consequently be precipitated. Accordingly obedient to his orders the people of Avrat-Alan and Otlou-keui rose and killed such Mussulmans as they could lay hands on, and erected some rough fortifications; other villages, such as Yeni-keui, &c., were visited by small bands of men with flags, who told the peasants they must leave their homes or otherwise the Turks would massacre them, and that a large Russian army was ready to cross the Balkan. At Zindjirli the priest, the schoolmaster, and some other men actually drove the inhabitants out and forced them to set fire to the village. In the neighbourhood of Otlou-keui four small Turkish villages forming what is known as the Yourouk-Mahallin were burnt, as was also the mixed village of Streldja, and a considerable number of Bulgarians from the neighbouring villages, repaired to Avrat-Alan and Otlou-keui. At the same time some slight preparation for resistance were made at Bratzigovo, Prasadum Dervent, and also apparently at Peroustitza, though what really took place in the latter village is involved in considerable mystery.

Benkowsky, leaving the neighbourhood of Otloukeui, went to Bellova, where he incited the people to rise, telling them that 1,500 men were to come from Batak, 2,000 from Bratzigovo, 1,000 from Teshtera, and 8,000 from Otloukeui, for the purpose of attacking Tatar-Bazardjik, and that they consequently need not fear their Turkish neighbours. He recommended all the peasants who came to him to burn their houses, as they would afterwards be rebuilt of marble. At Bellova there were seven zaptiehs, six at the railway station, and one employed in the "établissement des bois." Benkowsky gave orders that these men should be disarmed, and a body of insurgents