

Austro-Hungarian possession of Bosnia and the issue of Muslim emigration

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The annexation of Bosnia by Austro-Hungary accelerated the rate of emigration of that country's Muslims to the Ottoman Empire. In order to maintain their hold over Bosnia, the Austro-Hungarian rulers had to address this emigration problem and control nationalist movements by Serbs and Croats. This article discusses how the Austro-Hungarian regime dealt with the emigration problem that followed its annexation of Bosnia. Previous studies have tended to pay more attention to the international disputes with Russia and Serbia after the annexation, because of their direct relationship to the outbreak of WWI, while the subject of emigration has received little attention. Through an analysis of documents in Austrian and Bosnian archives, the author shows that Austro-Hungary attempted to return emigres to the Ottoman Empire back to Bosnia, in order to maintain control over the country. He also reconsiders how Austro-Hungary preserved its institutional unity after annexing Bosnia.

Austro-Hungary gained authority over the Bosnians by establishing a rule of law known as “Landesangehörigkeit”, a concept of nationality, or in this case, provincialism. This provision was, however, threatened by the rapid outflow of Bosnian Muslims, whom the Ottoman Empire had encouraged to migrate in order to defend its territories in the Balkans. The Ottoman rulers considered the Bosnian emigrants as Ottoman subjects and settled them primarily along its borders with Serbia and Bulgaria.

This situation led to an internal crisis in post-annexation Bosnia, caused by Serbs buying much of the land being sold by Muslims intending to emigrate, in an attempt to integrate Bosnia into Serbia. Joint Finance Minister Burián, who had administered Bosnia since 1903, thought it imperative that the emigration crisis be addressed immediately, in order to maintain Austro-Hungary control

over Bosnia. He asked the Joint Foreign Ministry to announce that the Ottoman Empire should permit the return of emigrants to Bosnia, if they chose to return. The Austro-Hungarian consular offices in the Ottoman Empire, however, could not easily intervene to return the emigrants, because to do so might break convention with the Porte, leading to an international dispute that might well end annexation. Austro-Hungary was thus forced into a more serious situation.

Indeed, some of the emigrants did return to Bosnia, due to the fact that the Ottoman Empire was not only having difficulty supporting them financially, but was also facing opposition to the arrival of Muslim emigrants from other ethnic groups within the regions the Bosnians settled. This presented an opportunity for the Austro-Hungarian rulers to re-strengthen their hold over Bosnia. By demanding that the returnees to Bosnia be subject only to “Landesangehörigkeit”, Austro-Hungary was able to avoid diplomatic friction with the Ottoman Empire and settle the internal crisis in Bosnia.