Book Reviews

G.N. Trubetskoï

*Notes of a Plenipotentiary: Russian Diplomacy and War in the Balkans, 1914–1917*  
(DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2016), 248 pp., $39.00 (pb),  

The memoir of Grigorii Nikolaevich Trubetskoï, scion of one of Russia’s oldest prominent noble families, a family with lineage dating to the 12th century Grand Prince of Lithuania Gediminas, *Notes of a Plenipotentiary*, starts in June 1914 and ends with an entry from January 25, 1917. Upon completing his Master’s Thesis in History and Philosophy at Moscow University in 1896, Trubetskoï joined the tsar’s diplomatic corps and was soon after posted to Constantinople where he spent the next 10 years. Over the course of this period and through this experience, he developed into one of the Empire’s handful of experts on the Ottoman Empire and its activities in the Balkans. In 1906 he took a hiatus from his diplomatic career and shifted his attention to writing about and speaking publicly on topics ranging from the foreign policy of the Empire to topics on liberals and liberalism in 20th century Russia. He was becoming a key figure among the liberals who expressed opposition to the tsar after 1905, not only on questions of political freedom and domestic reform, but also by criticizing the tsar’s foreign policy on nationalistic grounds as well. In 1912, his close friend, foreign minister S.D. Sazonov asked him to rejoin the Foreign Service specifically to head the ministry’s Near Eastern Department. In June 1914 Trubetskoï was thrust into the center of the Tsarist foreign policy decision making in the Balkans when he was named Russia’s representative to Serbia upon the sudden death of the prior representative, N.G. Hartwig. Little question exists that Trubetskoï had the trust, confidence, and above all else, the ear of S.D. Sazonov at this vital point in world history. Because of the outbreak of World War I, Trubetskoï does not arrive in Belgrade until November 1914, but he will remain with the Serbs until they flee their country in the winter of 1915–1916. His memoir therefore provides readers with a voice that was operating at the highest level of Russia’s diplomatic service and reporting from one
of Europe’s most embattled nations in the first part of World War I. The bulk of the material in his “Notes” can be viewed through two main themes: (1) The thinking about and operation of tsarist diplomacy as it sought to define and then pursue wartime objectives. (2) The overall conditions and manifold efforts to relieve the suffering of the Serbian military, civilian, and ultimately refugee population.

Trubetskoi spells out in some detail how one of the main objectives of his activities was to negotiate a way for Bulgaria to join the Entente in the winter of 1914–1915. Getting Bulgaria to declare War on the Central Powers was deemed vital to Russia’s pursuit of its overall war aim of gaining control of the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmora, and the Bosphorus Straits. Readers soon learn that the challenge for Trubetskoi and for Russian diplomacy in regard to the Bulgarian question was Macedonia. Both the Serbs and Bulgarians wanted Macedonia and sought control over the territory since at least the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913. Here the editor could have provided readers with some additional annotation to explain the thorny background of Balkan relations in the period leading up to World War I. Trubetskoi learns that the Serbs, under the direction of Prime Minister Nikola Pasic, have no intention of surrendering any part of Macedonia. When he visited the Tsar at Stavka in May 1915, Trubetskoi explained the difficulties involved in getting Serbia to relinquish Macedonia, and Nicholas II offered no advice (true to form) and instead suggested that the Prince visit with Grand Duke Nicholas to work on the alignment of military and diplomatic policy in the Balkans (p. 92). Nothing came of Trubetskoi’s diplomacy because the events, beginning with the failure of the Gallipoli campaign, resulted in Bulgaria joining the Entente and the Austrians, Germans, and Bulgarians launching a combined offensive that would force Serbia effectively out of the war.

When the war turned on Serbia, Trubetskoi carefully explains that the cause for the breakdown of civil society was a twofold and interconnected process. He links the root of the problem to a constitutionally weak monarch who did not pay much attention to the development of civil society. As a result, when the army faltered in the fall of 1915, there was little, if any at all, relief aid available to help especially the civilians with their suffering. Thus, when the city of Nis grew in population from 23,000 people in 1914 to 147,000 people in 1915, there was no governmental aid or support available to help the starving influx of refugees who soon faced harsh Balkan winter conditions as they fled toward the Adriatic Sea (p. 73). Perhaps the situation is best summed up by learning that Trubetskoi and his wife worked diligently to raise money for Serbian refugees at benefits in Moscow and St. Petersburg and then used the funds collected to send Russian Sisters of Mercy to Serbia. Serbia, as portrayed by the