

## ALEXANDER F. HILFERDIND “DISCOVERS” BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract:**

The article deals with the history of the Slavacist Alexander F. Hilferding’s presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina. From 1857 to 1858 he was the Russian consul in Sarajevo. During this time, Hilferding traveled extensively and composed the book “Bosnia, Herzegovina and Old Serbia.”

### **Keywords:**

A.F. Hilferding, Sarajevo, the Russian consulate, A.S. Ionin, “Bosnia, Herzegovina and Old Serbia.”

**АННОТАЦИЯ:** К.В. МЕЛЬЧАКОВА. «АЛЕКСАНДР Ф. ГИЛЬФЕРДИНГ «ОТКРЫВАЕТ» БОСНИЮ И ГЕРЦЕГОВИНУ».

В статье идет речь о пребывании слависта Александра Федоровича Гильфердинга в Боснии и Герцеговине. В 1857–58 гг. он занимал пост российского консула в Сараеве. За это время Гильфердинг много путешествовал и составил сочинение «Босния, Герцеговина и Старая Сербия».

### **Ключевые слова:**

А.Ф. Гильфердинг, Сараево, российское консульство, А.С. Ионин, «Босния, Герцеговина и Старая Сербия».

Alexander F. Hilferding (1831–72) was a graduate of Moscow University, a Slavophile, a Slavacist and a diplomat who introduced Bosnia and Herzegovina to the Russian people. In 1856 Russia decided to create the first Russian consulate in the city of Sarajevo, the center of the Bosnian lands. At that time, very little was known about this part of the Balkans. In the 19th century, modern Bosnia and Herzegovina became part of the Ottoman Empire and was called the Bosnian pashalyk and Herzegovinian sandjak. Their inhabitants were mainly Slavs with common roots, but they were divided along religious lines, confessing Islam, Orthodoxy, and Catholicism. This northwestern part of the Balkan peninsula was poor and backward. Diplomats called it “Europe’s hinterland,” “the backwater of the Ottoman Empire” and felt no particular desire to go there. However, the scholar and Slavacist Hilferding was very attracted to this mysterious corner of the earth. He hoped to find unknown Slavic manuscripts in it and to study the life and customs of the local population.

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<sup>1</sup> The work was carried out with the financial support of the RFBR (grant 18–512–76004).



*A. F. Hilferding.*  
State Archive of RF, F. 1463,  
inv. 1, st. u. 802

Hilferding received an appointment for a year. During this time, he was not only supposed to organize the work of the Russian consulate but also to study in detail the Bosnian pashalyk and the Herzegovinian sandjak. The way to his destination lay through Ragusa (Dubrovnik), where in April 1857 he was met by the secretary of the Sarajevo consulate, Alexander S. Ionin (1837–1900), who delivered to him instructions, a “firman” and “berat”. They then went on together to Sarajevo. The route took two weeks, during which time the young scientist encountered an exotic oriental culture and customs that made an indelible impression on him.

In Mostar, the main city of Herzegovina, Russian diplomats were placed in the palace of a local pasha. They stayed for five days. The manner in which Ottoman officials conducted business left them surprised and

bewildered. In a letter to Alexandra V. Pletnyova, Hilferding described in detail the peculiarities of the Turkish manager’s lifestyle: “At 8 o’clock, they will call for us to dine with His Excellency: they put us at a table laden with an infinite number of pickles and bottles and serve everyone pipes (...). the Pasha will eat a salty piece, drink a glass of mastic (a kind of very strong vodka), drink water, choke on smoke from the hookah and compliment me in Turkish, which they will translate to me and to which I will respond with an appropriate expression of feelings; so it goes for two hours (...) until they reach the most ardent outpourings of love, and until the decanter of mastic is drained to the bottom (...), then the dinner itself drags on for two hours, with twenty-five foods of the most diverse variety and between them each time a pipe, but no longer accompanied by compliments, heavy silence; finally, at midnight, the table is pushed back, and everyone sits for another half an hour, some weighed down by wine fumes, some by boredom and tobacco smoke. Thus do the Turkish nobility spend their evenings.”

During his short stay in the Slavic regions of the Ottoman Empire A. F. Hilferding managed to travel throughout almost all of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The data collected during these trips formed the basis of his writings. There were three such trips, and they covered the following routes:

1. Ragusa — Trebinje — Mostar — Sarajevo;
2. Sarajevo — Rogatitsa — Visegrad (south of Bosnia) — Old Serbia (Pech, Kosovo field, Dechany, Prizren, Prishtina, Drobnyak, Piva) — Sarajevo;
3. A trip to central Bosnia (Foynitsa, Travnik, Yaytse, Banya Luka).

The scholar conducted these trips not out of idle curiosity; during the course of each trip he acted simultaneously as researcher, public figure and diplomat. His first priority was to collect manuscripts and other materials for the writing of his "History of the Slavs." In monasteries, Hilferding explained to the priests the difference between printed and handwritten material: "Hundreds of times I was shown and even sent from distant places some old printed books from Serbian printing houses (flourishing in the 16th century), in full confidence that these were manuscripts ..." He nevertheless managed to accumulate a rich collection in Bosnia and Herzegovina which is now stored in the Russian National Library's collection and available to all readers. In addition, the former professional philologist studied the dialects and subdialects of this part of the area of the Serbo-Croatian language and compiled a dictionary of folk proverbs and sayings.

A Slavophile, Hilferding set himself the goal of conducting a detailed study of the life and customs of the Turkish Slavs, searching for a possible bond with the Russian reader.

As the first diplomatic representative of Russia in this region, he had to compile a complete representation of it as well as of the Turkish government.

In the pages of "Travel", the Russian consul offered the reader a variety of information about Bosnia, Herzegovina and Old Serbia. He paid attention to nature, people, the life and customs of the locals, culture, history, the Turkish government, language. The work contains the texts of collected medieval letters and a detailed analysis of legends.

This work was first published in 1858 in the pages of the Slavophile journal *Russkaya Beseda* ("The Russian conversation").

This was not Hilferding's only work on Bosnia. In the same year, his new essay entitled "Bosnia in early 1858" was published. It begins thus: "I want to briefly acquaint the reader with the domestic state of a Slavic country which may in time become quite important in southeastern Europe." Several main topics are addressed by the scholar:

1. geography of the region, nature, economic development;
2. population, ethnic and religious composition;
3. Turkish management.

While Hilferding was traveling around the region entrusted to him, affairs in Sarajevo were being conducted by A. S. Ionin. In the autumn of 1857, another uprising against the Turks was brewing in Herzegovina. The Ottoman authorities accused the Russian diplomats of organizing popular unrest. The main suspect was Hilferding, who traveled extensively throughout the Bosnian pashalyk and Herzegovinian sandjak. For a time the consular secretary, Ionin, landed up in a Turkish prison. In reality, not only did Hilferding not engage in incitement, but, on the contrary, he was among the first to communicate in his dispatches the danger of imminent developments. There was no open interference by the consul. His reports speak only of sympathy for the local population and an attempt

to resolve the issue by peaceful means, being in agreement with the Ottoman authorities. In addition, he sincerely believed that the state of Bosnian society was such that even successful demonstrations against the Turkish authorities would not lead to anything good. It was necessary to carry out long-term preparatory work in the region, to develop education. Later, all charges against the Russian diplomats were dropped. Hilferding's term of service in Bosnia came to an end, and he had to return home. He did not return to St. Petersburg alone. Accompanying him to the Russian capital was a ten-year-old native of Mostar, Jovan Drech, taken to be brought up in the former consul's family.

During his travels, Hilferding staunchly endured all manner of hardships and inconveniences that befell him: the most difficult crossings along impassable roads, stops in primitive Turkish khans (inns), hours-long dinners and endless conversations with Ottoman officials... In a letter to Croatian historian and political figure Ivan Kukulevich Saksinsky, he wrote: “My stay in Bosnia left a pleasant impression on me for its originality and considerable scholarly productivity; but I will say in all honesty that I wouldn't wish on anyone the chance to experience life in Sarajevo.”

On returning to Russia, Hilferding soon left diplomatic service, but Bosnia left a mark on his life. He was a member of a charitable organization of the Moscow Slavic Committee and later headed its branch in St. Petersburg (1868). The idea and organization of sending boys from Bosnia and Herzegovina to study in Russia was his. On the basis of the data he collected, systematic assistance was provided to schools and Orthodox churches in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

He was not forgotten in Sarajevo. In 1866 the first Bosnian newspaper, *Bosanski vjestnik* (“The Bosnian Herald”) published a short note that the emperor had granted an estate to the former Russian consul in Sarajevo.

The third volume of Hilferding's collected works was entirely devoted to Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was published in 1873, after the death of the scholar. In addition to his own works, there were translations into Russian by Hilferding of the works of his contemporaries from Bosnia and Herzegovina — Yoaniky Pamuchina, Staka Skenderova, Nicephor Duchich, and Procopy Chokorilo. The well-known Russian poet F. I. Tyutchev responded to Hilferding's death by writing that Hilferding, though not a Slav by blood, had become famous among all Slavs and had proven by deed that in the field one could be a warrior if he possessed valor and bravery.

*Translated by the author*

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