

THE BALKAN PENINSULA 1815 - 1914:

AN EXPLOSIVE SITUATION

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I have a very vivid mental image. It is a picture of a white-hot day and a boiling crowd. Of a ridiculous, fat, middle-aged man with an outrageous plumed helmet and equally outrageous mustache. His wife is a matronly woman draped in white with a parasol and a sort of battleship for a hat. They are bobbing and nodding self-consciously through the crowd to an open-air car, bovinely descending some steps to their deaths.

"On June 28, 1914, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir to the imperial throne of Austria-Hungary, and his wife, were assassinated in Sarajevo, Bosnia. Within a short period of time the heated reaction which followed led to the First World War."

This is a statement such as might introduce any textbook recounting of the Great War. It does not really say much of a factual nature. But it always manages to bring this image into my mind.

One's model textbook usually goes on to explain the complex network of alliances that existed between the Balkan states and their more powerful neighbors, and how the honoring of commitments in their region acted as the catalyst which began an inevitable war which felled so many governments, killed so many men, and altered the map of Europe so much.

Historians next describe a number of very good reasons

for the suitable war environment which existed. Among these are the growth of the arms race, particularly in Britain and Germany, the traditional strength of the military class in Prussian society, the bellicose, obnoxious nature of the Kaiser, with his jealous hatred for things British, his loathing for Russia, and the weakness of the Tsar.

These reasons we are all familiar with. But one thing used to confuse me about "The reasons for The War" until I made a greater study of the subject. It goes back to my strong mental picture of the assassination of the Archduke and his wife. What were they doing on an official visit to a one-horse country like Bosnia? Why did a Serbian (whatever that is) want to kill them? And, of course, most importantly, why in heaven's name did most of the globe go to war because of this rather insignificant stretch of ground that is called the Balkan Peninsula? The impression I had, perhaps an erroneous one, was that the murder seemed to be treated as an isolated act, or as a coincidence, which was insignificant except that it managed to start a world war.

Upon investigation one quickly realizes that the death of the Habsburg heir apparent was not an isolated act but the culmination of many years of political unrest and change in the Balkans. Insurrection and war in this region is woven through the history of Europe between the fall of Napoleon and the guns of August. This situation was a constant source of strife between the major European powers. The most astute statesmen of the day (Bismarck, for example) realized that

eventually some Balkan crisis would result in a general European mobilization. Our historians don't skirt this issue when discussing World War I; they just do not emphasize enough the Balkan situation in the 19th century as a major cause of the War. What I shall do in the time allowed is to point out some of the major problems of the region during this time and how they affected and were affected by the European theater.

Most of the so-called Balkan Peninsula at the fall of Napoleon in 1815 was under the control of the Turkish Empire. This once grand and aggressive country, now on the wane, had, at the height of its sphere of influence in the 17th century, extended northward almost to Vienna. By the early 19th century the Turkish government exercised a fairly benign form of despotism, gradually slipping from its control, over the very diverse national groups and religions in its European empire. There were Moslems, Roman Catholics, and Orthodox Christians, Rumanians, Greeks, Turks, and a host of Slavic tribes faintly familiar to us, such as the Albanians, Montenegrans, Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, and Bulgars. These groups, even the ones of closely related racial stock, tended to be suspicious and jealous of one another, let alone their Turkish masters, and therefore prone to insurrection. Some lived in rocky, rugged and isolated areas which made colonial policy difficult to administer and not profitable, hence a hands-off policy on the part of the Turks.

However, the areas more closely controlled by Constantinople

were administered by a quasi-theocratic government. Since the state religion was Islam, the Koran was the source of inspiration on matters of state. The Koran being very specific about the place in society for infidels, non-Moslems had no political rights.

There were several major forces at work in Europe and in the Balkans which gave rise to the tensions hereinafter described. The first was the development of militant nationalism, which came to a head mid-century. This tended to combine groups of people with similar cultural characteristics, heretofore separated by tradition, outside political influences, or poor communication. Homogeneous groups, once relegated to isolated duchies and counties were joined together in the 19th century by the railroad, the telegraph and by newsprint. A burgeoning middle class, eager and capable of seizing political power, were no longer willing to be ruled by the old autocratic governments. They discovered their next-door neighbors to be long-lost brothers, and becoming fellow countrymen did not seem like such an illogical idea.

The most notable examples of this process were the unifications of Germany and Italy (Germany, for example, at the turn of the 18th century, consisted of more than 300 sovereign states). Russia's game was to appeal to those instincts when attempting to take over eastern European Slavic groups such as the Poles. This they dubbed Pan-Slavism. However, eastern Europeans were mostly Roman Catholics and had hated the Russians for centuries, so this unctuous tactic was never very successful.

Who says you can't learn anything by studying history?

The other tension creating force was external. There was a conflict between those countries which wanted to waste the Turkish Empire for their own gains and those that saw a strong unified force in the Balkans as a barrier or wedge in the center of Europe which protected the balance of power. After the demise of Turkey, the conflict was, naturally, between those powers which sought to protect the independence of the fledgling states and those which sought to control them.

The main aggressor in the Balkans was Russia. As we all know from our lessons, one of the constants of Russian history is that, despite her great size and resources, she was bereft of seaports that were not frozen part of the year. Hence her drive to obtain more coastline. One of the other constants of Russian history is the rest of Europe's fear of her getting it. Another remarkable attribute of Russia has always been her extreme xenophobia. The more miles she can put between Moscow and her neighbors, it seems the calmer and easier to get along with she is (Thank goodness for the Soviet Block, eh?). This led to her zeal for acquisition in the Balkans. Russia's big theme was always her desire to make herself the protector of Turkish Christians against the barbarisms of oppressive Turkish rule. That's how she rationalized it.

Austria, who feared Russian advances more than any major power, supported Ottoman claims heavily. You will notice, also, that the Austrians were quite eager to fill the void left by the Turkish departure. The sovereignty of new Balkan nations

was of no particular importance from an egalitarian standpoint.

England, France, Italy and Prussia (later Germany) were very interested in seeing the balance of power in Europe upheld and Russia kept at bay. Germany's traditional fear was a two-front war, especially after she trounced France in 1870-71 and earned France's undying hatred. Bismarck's policy after 1871 was to keep Austria-Hungary and Russia away from each other's throats in the Balkans, but yet to play one against the other so as to prevent a disastrous alliance with France. Bismarck also did not care one jot about the right of any nation in this area to exist, but didn't have any ambitions for territorial expansion in this direction.

As I have said, there was a long history of Russian antagonism towards the Turks, of her persistent pressure to extend her influence into this part of the world. Before mid-century there had been a number of Russo-Turkish conflicts: in 1768-74, 1787-92, 1806-12, and 1828-29. The greatest, however, came in the 1850's in the form of the Crimean War. It was, in fact, one of the worst wars of the century.

This was in direct conflict with the spirit of the Agreement of Münchengrätz wrangled by the Austrian Prince Metternich in 1833 between Austria and Russia. Among other things, this provided that the two countries would do their darndest to prop up the Ottoman Empire. They must have been feeling a bit sorry for Constantinople, for she had just lost Algeria to France and Greece (only the southern half of present-day Greece) had gained her independence. The crumbling process

was now well under way.

But the Agreement of Munchengrätz was a generation old and mens' memories usually don't last very long, so by mid-century we find Russia back on the acquisition trail. The Crimean War was ostinsibly over the Holy Places and the protection of Roman and Orthodox Christians in Turkey. But it really involved the whole Turkish question, that is, the conflict between Russian attempts to control Constantanople and Europe's fear of Russian expansion. It was also a matter of rivalry between St. Petersburg and Paris.

In 1852, the Turks, after much pressure from France, permitted Roman Catholics some previously denied political rights. This was to the exclusion of Orthodox Catholics. At this point it became a matter of honor and duty for Russia to secure these same rights for fellow Eastern Catholics. The overzealous Tsar backed up his diplomacy by positioning troops near the borders of the Turkish provinces of Wallachia and Moldavia. A conference designed to avert war with all the major powers in attendance was called in Vienna to no avail. Turkey declared war on Russia in October, 1853.

Soon thereafter a sea skirmish took place on the Black Sea in which a Turkish naval squadron was sunk by the whole of the Russian fleet. French and British public opinion, not to mention the desires of their governments to meddle in someone else's business, clamored for assistance for Turkey. So, war was declared in March, 1854. The Piedmontese eventually declared war on Russia and Austria moved troops eastward to protect

Turkish holdings.

To make a long story short, hostilities dragged on for three years until Tsar Nicholas I died and Alexander II succeeded him. Alexander did not particularly enjoy the strains of being ganged up against, and peace was signed at a congress of the major powers in Paris.

The settlement of Paris contained many caveats, but for our purposes the important ones were as follows: The autonomy of Turkey was affirmed, as well as the right of the Sultan to deal with his subjects, Christian or otherwise, as he pleased. Turkey was given status as a major power. This was important because it signified the recognition by Europe of the importance of Turkey in the balance of power. However, the Sultan granted concessions which marked the further disintegration of the Ottoman Empire which the Allied nations had fought a war to prevent. He undertook to grant a large degree of self-government to the European principalities of Moldavia, Wallachia and Serbia.

As the century began to mature, explosive tensions were building in the Balkans for several reasons. Firstly, Turkish political reforms, where initiated, were a failure. In 1856, the Sultan abolished the civil authority of all religious leaders (patriarchs, rabbis, bishops, etc.) who heretofore had had great judicial powers. A Turkish national citizenship was granted to all people and equality before the law was guaranteed. Moslems and non-Moslems were granted equal opportunity for civil service and army positions. As with many sweeping reforms in history, they were not properly administered nor readily accepted, and therefore did not make it to the local level. Naturally, this served

to infuriate Christian majorities in offended areas.

Secondly, the Sultan opened Turkey to Western influences, allowed freer newspapers, and built railroads. A little freedom is a dangerous thing. It makes people want more.

Thirdly, as some nationalist groups became independent and Turkey relaxed her hold on others, a void was created where stability once reigned. These states were restless, expansive, unstable, and the potential prey of other major powers jockeying for supremacy in the Balkans.

The first was Greece, which was granted independence in 1830. However, the new state contained only one-half of the Greek-speaking people. The area of Macedonia, which is now a part of Greece, remained a holding of Turkey for quite some time. As a result, a strong pan-Hellenic movement developed in Greece. This, as well as the meager resources of the region and the instability of the government, insured an era of turbulence.

Secondly, Serbia, which became semi-independent in 1829, was in a similar situation. There were many Serbians living outside her boundaries in neighboring territories. In addition, the country had no seaport, the only water route being the Danube, making Serbia dependent on Austria for commerce. This made Serbia in the 19th century aggressively expansive and unstable. She had a history during this period of transitory rulers and governments, of assassinations and coups.

Rumania was formed into a single kingdom in 1859 out of the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, under weak Ottoman suzerainty. Rumania was a richer country than in the southern Balkans and could count on a more prosperous economy. However, the aggressions of Russia and

Austria-Hungary made continuous Rumanian independence problematical.

The province of Albania, on the eastern coast of the Adriatic, could be described as mountainous, isolated, semi-tribal and barbaric. Turkish rule was always weak here, not because of any development of nationalistic resistance, but because of the impossibility of ever imposing any sort of overlordship at all.

In the eastern Balkans on the Black Sea lived the Bulgars, a Finnish-Tartar stock speaking a Slavic tongue. Since this province was geographically of greater use to Rússia, Bulgarian nationalism was always encouraged by the Bear.

From the 1850's till the mid '70's, things remained relatively quiet, when there were risings against the Turks in the provinces of Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina which turned into full scale revolts. The revolts were suppressed by the usual method- wholesale massacre. The reported atrocities brought in the two suzerainties of Serbia and Montenegro in favor of the rebels and earned the outrage of England and France. To boot, the Sultan had recently suspended interest payments on his large foreign debt, which had European investors furious.

Russia responded in the typical way- she called for the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. Austria was unsure. Would it be better to have a weak Turkey or a strong Russia in the Balkans? Should the Habsburgs divide the spoils with Russia, or work to keep the traditional barrier in place? England was

adamant about keeping Russia out of the Balkans, but wasn't sure whether it should be achieved through a unified force or strong individual states. France was disinterested in any sort of military entanglement. Bismarck wanted to see the Ottoman Empire carved up at the diplomatic banquet table, with all the major powers invited. This would keep Austria and Russia amicably disposed to one another, thereby saving Germany from having to take sides in a squabble. If it were to come to blows, Bismarck preferred a debilitating war with Russia isolated against Turkey. That is exactly what happened.

Serbia was soon drubbed by Turkey and appealed to the international powers for help. Russia promised certain territorial rights to Austria in trade for Austria's non-intervention in Russia's dismemberment of Turkey. A month after Serbia made peace with Turkey, Russia declared war on her in April, 1877. The Balkan states of Rumania, Bulgaria, Montenegro and Serbia naturally joined with Russia. By the beginning of 1878, Russian armies had taken Sofia, Bulgaria, and were marching towards Constantinople, at which time the Turks asked for an armistice, and a treaty was signed at San Stefano in March. Turkey recognized the independence of Rumania, Serbia, Montenegro and a greatly enlarged Bulgaria. Rumania was given slight increases, and Russia received a few towns in the Caucasus. Turkey had to destroy its fortresses still on the Danube and pay a war indemnity.

The treaty created a number of immediate international

tensions: Rumania, Serbia and Greece resented the growth of Bulgaria. Austria and Britain were afraid of the inevitable domination of Bulgaria by Russia. Bismarck attempted to arbitrate by calling a congress in Berlin in June of 1878. Present were Russia, Turkey, Austria, Britain, France, Italy and Germany.

By the terms of the congress, Rumania, Serbia and Montenegro were reaffirmed in their sovereignty. Russia was allowed to keep her few acquisitions. The new Bulgaria was reduced in size by the exclusion of Rumelia and Macedonia, which were restored to Turkish rule, while Bulgaria itself was declared to be "an autonomous and tributary Principality under the Suzerainty of His Imperial Majesty the Sultan." Austria was allowed to occupy and administer Bosnia and Herzegovina and Britain was given Cyprus.

The congress solved nothing in the Balkans. It sacrificed the nationalistic aspirations of the Balkan peoples to the wider political motives of the major powers. By their actions they insured that the pattern of unrest and rebellion would continue inside the Balkans. Also, the powers themselves all failed in their missions and were left dissatisfied. Those who wanted a strong Turkey were dissappointed, and Russia realized few of her true aims.

The next crisis came in 1885, the result of neighborly jealousies. Serbia declared war on Bulgaria, who defeated the aggressor handily. The Bulgarian crisis initiated a power shift in international politics. In December, 1887,

Britain, Austria-Hungary and Italy made an agreement to keep the peace and status quo in the Near East, insuring Turkish authority in Bulgaria- a move made entirely against Russian expansionist aims. As for Bulgaria, she entered into a period of relative stability and growth, enhanced by a growing economic and diplomatic relationship with Russia.

In 1894 there was another revolt. In the congress of Berlin, Turkey had promised to give freedom from oppression to all Christian groups. There were several million Armenian Christians living in the mountainous regions north of Constantinople and on the southern fringes of the Black'Sea. After a number of years this minority began to realize that improved treatment would never come about and began to agitate for national independence. The current Turkish sultan, Abdul-Hamid II, launched a fanatical massacre against these people. No effective European resistance to the situation could be launched because of German, Austrian and Russian refusal to interfere.

A war with Greece exploded in 1896. The island of Crete was under Turkish rule, although it was populated mostly by Greek Christians. Crete revolted against the Turks and the King of Greece sent a force to Crete's aid. This led to war and Greece was defeated in about a month. Only the intervention of the Powers prevented serious Greek losses, but, oddly enough, the loss to Turkey was greater because Britain, France, Italy and Russia joined in forcing Turkey to grant freedom to Crete and to withdraw its troops. Another piece of

Turkey was thus hacked off.

Further disintegration occurred in 1909 when the sultan, Abdul-Hamid, was overthrown by a group of ^{the} liberal intellegensia, backed by the army. The resulting weakness in the new government gave Austria the opportunity of annexing Bosnia and Herzegovina. These provinces had over a million Serbs, who now turned their militancy against Austria. This also made the nation of Serbia hostile to Austria and friendly to Russia. At the same time the Bulgarian prince declared Bulgaria to be completely free of Ottoman domination, clinging to Russia for support.

The southern part of the shattered Ottoman Empire, made up of the territories of Albania, Montenegro, Macedonia, and the mountainous regions between Bulgaria and Serbia, were made up of distinct national groups with very diverse customs: Greeks, Serbs, Montenegrins, Albanians and Bulgars. The isolation of these rocky valleys and hills had provided age-old separation, and these groups traditionally tended to rival one another. The old Turkish regime realized and respected these differences. But the new, highly nationalistic Turkish government didn't, and tried to impose impossible standards on the region, such as a common legal system, a national language and compulsory military service. It was only a matter of time...

On October 8, 1912, Montenegro declared war on Turkey. Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia quickly followed suit. Within a month Turkey had been defeated, and the stunned European

powers wondered how they were going to check this powerful force which they had helped to unleash. Austria-Hungary was in a most difficult situation as the only superpower to have outrightly annexed Balkan territories. Russia, likewise, was kicked out of bed by her former chum, Bulgaria, and was put in the position of having to prevent Bulgaria from over-running Constantinople and endangering the freedom of the precious Straits, which guarded Russia's entrance and exit to and from the Black Sea.

In the end the Balkan League, as these countries called themselves, made an armistice with Turkey and conferred with each other in London to iron things out. The London Conference was again a triumph for Balkan independence. It was agreed that Albania should become an independent state. Austria and Russia were both agreeable to this.

However, the Balkan League soon broke up, because Serbia, Rumania, Bulgaria and Greece began fighting among themselves. I won't try to explain the details. The long and short of the newest conflict was that Greece got southern Macedonia, Serbia got northern Macedonia and Rumania got the northern tip of Bulgaria on the Black Sea.

On the eve of the First World War, there were still complex problems in the Balkans. These new states were such a crazy quilt of cultural and religious groups that borders were difficult to establish, their government ineffective and their citizens unstable. The major powers had not been able to determine how to effectively control this region, try as they might. Indeed, they pretty well acknowledged that a Balkan

crisis would some day precipitate a European war. Most importantly, the Balkan leaders themselves viewed a major confrontation as inevitable, and each looked to particular major powers for support against aggressors when that time should arrive. The battle lines were all delineated well in advance. It was only a matter of chance that a Serbian dissident assassinated an Austrian in a Bosnian town controlled by Austria-Hungary.

I hope I have proved my point. The political situation in the Balkan Peninsula was a major, if not the major cause of World War I. It is such an irony that this was a land of such little commercial, industrial or agricultural importance to Europe. It was really only a corridor, a thoroughfare between the great places of the world. It is amazing how many wars have been fought because of such lands in history.