

**From the Eastern Crisis, 1875–1878 to the  
Outbreak of the Balkan Wars, 1912:  
Great Power Rivalry and Diplomacy**

*André Gerolymatos*

The Balkan conundrum, as understood in the late 19th century, was intertwined with the demise of the Ottoman Empire. The fate of the “sick man” of Europe, as the Great Powers described the Ottoman regime, was a problem that the Europeans preferred not to deal with or at least put off for another generation. In this context, the persistent demands of the Balkan nations for independence of historic lands was unwelcome and a nuisance. The very notion of historic or national territories was a matter of interpretation and, more often than not, dispute—certainly a critical issue for the Balkan states but of little interest to the Great Powers. Only when massacres of Christians in the Ottoman parts of the Balkans caught the attention of the European press, then the governments were forced to act. But care was taken to avoid a military conflict.

For example, when the Christians of Ottoman Macedonia rebelled, the so-called Ilinden Uprising in 1903 provoked a horrific massacre, which caused public outcry in European capitals. In response, Russia and Austria-Hungary forced the sultan to accept a series of reforms. The Müzzsteg program achieved little except to assuage public opinion. Only when the situation in the region degenerated to the brink of a European war would the powers reluctantly intervene and sever another chunk of Ottoman terri-

tory. Each amputation, however, was kept to a minimum for fear of further destabilizing the Ottoman Empire. Accordingly, the newly created and future Balkan states were constituted in such a way so as not to threaten the delicate balance of power in the Near East.<sup>1</sup>

The Congress of Berlin in 1878 underscored this policy as well as it exposed the triumph and limitations of European diplomacy. The concert of Europe painstakingly orchestrated by Count Metternich in 1814–1815 to restore the old regime and contain the forces of nationalism had disintegrated during the Crimean War (1853–1856) and was replaced by a patchwork of shifting alliances. Indeed, for the European powers nationalism was no longer terrifying but a force that could be harnessed to serve the interests of the state. In 1870–1871 it made it possible for Otto von Bismarck to exploit nationalism and unite the German states into a single empire by defeating the French. By the 1870s even the absolute tsars of Russia could ill afford to ignore popular sentiment. During the last thirty years of the 19th century each of the Great Powers occasionally would manipulate public opinion, as government had become increasingly susceptible to popular sensitivities with respect to foreign policy. Nowhere was this vulnerability more prevalent and dangerous for the Europeans than in the Near East.<sup>2</sup>

British policy towards the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century was to prevent the Russians from controlling the Straits. In the post Crimean War period, following the destruction of the Russian fleet, British interests were focussed on the Suez Canal, whose construction in 1869 meant that the Mediterranean now served as a staging area for the protection of British assets in Asia. Containment of Russia was essential in Southeastern Europe but critical in Central Asia where the Great Game was waged with deadly earnest between the British and Russian empires.<sup>3</sup>

The French, following their defeat in the Franco-Prussian War were more consumed with re-acquiring Great Power status and the prospect of a future Franco-German conflict, than they were with the Near East. Austria-Hungary resisted any change, especially in the Balkans, that threatened to ignite nationalist feelings among its multicultural subjects, many of whom were linked by religious or

ethnic ties to the sultan's subjects in southeastern Europe. Austria-Hungary, therefore, counted on the Ottomans to keep these ethnic groups in the Balkans under control and to forestall the nightmare of new ethnic states on its eastern frontier. The Russians, for their part, were still recovering from the Crimean War and desperately needed a means to end their isolation from the Great Powers. In practical terms this meant that Russia had to ignore the Balkan Slavs and Christians and secure the alliance of one or more of the Great Powers before embarking on adventures in southeastern Europe or against the Ottomans.

The Balkan communities under Ottoman rule only received effective support for their struggle for emancipation when it involved the strategic interests of the Europeans, which invariably it did. The Greek War of Independence, for example, was a near-death experience for the Ottoman Empire and a clear indication that empire could collapse with the corresponding critical vacuum in the Near and Middle East. The defeat of the Ottomans undermined the sultan's authority and ambitious provincial pashas saw this as an opportunity to carve out their own kingdoms. On 25 May 1838, Muhammad Ali, the pasha of Egypt, informed Britain, and France that he intended to declare independence from the Ottoman Empire. Ali's proposed session ran contrary to the interests and policy of the European powers to maintain the territorial status quo within the Ottoman Empire. In response to the crisis the Great Powers, in this case led by Russia, tried in vain to prevent looming conflict. But they could not prevent the war that broke out. In less than two years, Ali's son, Ibrahim, advanced against the Ottomans and by 1840 had defeated the sultan's forces. The Ottoman fleet defected to Ali and it was only a matter of time before the Egyptian pasha assumed the throne. At this point the Great Powers intervened and forced Ali to accept hereditary rule of Egypt and renounce any claims to the Ottoman sultanate or any of the sultan's territories.<sup>4</sup> The Great powers were prepared to accept reasonable amputations of Ottoman territory as long as the empire remained intact. During the course of the crisis, tensions between Britain and France and between France and the German states threaten to



bring Europe into another war but compromise and containment of France ensured peace.<sup>5</sup>

The desire for compromise and containment was also why the Great Powers decided to limit the size of the new Greece in 1830. They did not want the creation of a Balkan state (at least not at this time) to pose a serious threat to the sultan's European domains or bring about a confrontation amongst the European powers. By compromising on the frontiers of the Greek state they were able to suspend the Eastern Question for a generation, but they could not put the genie back in the bottle. The Greek experience served as an example to the other Balkan peoples, and after 1870, new waves of national determination created the impetus for additional Balkan states.

Ultimately, these new states were not viable economically or sociologically and as soon as circumstances permitted, each one generated a shopping list of irredentist claims against the Ottomans and its other neighbours. In the language of diplomacy, small states have irredentist demands, but major powers have security interests. The Romanians desired Transylvania, the Serbs wanted Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, the Greeks dreamed of securing Asia Minor, the Aegean islands, Crete and Macedonia, while the Bulgarians envisioned an outlet to the Aegean through the acquisition of Macedonia. The Albanians in 1878 inconveniently laid claim to a national state whose land mass challenged the territorial ambitions of the other Balkan states but the Europeans ignored them until 1913. In effect, the shopping list of historical territories was in reality a wish list that held few prospects of fulfillment unless each of the contenders could secure an alliance with one or more of the Great Powers. The only asset that the Balkan states could offer to potential allies was strategic location, and even this did not become essential to the Great Powers until the end of the 19th century. Bulgaria was a case in point.

Bulgaria's geopolitical proximity to Constantinople and the Straits still represents a vital concern to Russia today as it did in the 19th century. During the Yugoslav crises in the 1990s considerable rhetoric and spilled ink was expended on Russia's ties to the Serbs.

Russia, however, could only be counted upon to let the Serbs down, as was the case in 1809. Even in 1914, Russian exertions on behalf of Serbia were linked to European geopolitical considerations. Bulgaria and Romania were and remain primary to Russian interests. Remarkably, but not surprising in view of Russia's Balkan failures earlier in the 19th century, Russia did not express an active diplomatic interest in Bulgaria until very late in the century. Between the last decade of the 18th century and the Great Eastern Crisis of the 1870s, the Danubian Principalities, Serbia, and Greece were the focus of Russian diplomatic efforts in southeastern Europe. Later, Britain and France overshadowed Russia's influence in Greece and Serbia, while the Russians replaced their policy of pan-Orthodoxy with Pan-Slavism.

Bulgarian national consciousness was slow to develop in comparison with Serbian, Greek, and Romania nationalism. One consideration was that Bulgaria was the Balkan province closest to the Ottoman imperial capital and easily susceptible to administrative and political centralization that the Sublime Porte implemented after the first wave of uprisings in Serbia and Greece.<sup>6</sup> Another factor was that Greek control over Bulgaria's ecclesiastical hierarchy, as well as over its cultural, educational and economic institutions, hindered the emergence of an indigenous intellectual and political elite with ties to the West.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, although the Russian Empire was in close proximity to Bulgaria, Russian foreign policy inadvertently delayed the emergence of a Bulgarian liberation movement. Despite the numerous wars the Russians had waged against the Porte in the second half of the 19th century, Russia attempted to maintain good relations with the Ottoman Empire as well as with Britain and Austria-Hungary. The Russians had suffered a serious military defeat in the Crimean War, which had left them diplomatically isolated. Russian policy, in the aftermath of the conflict, was to overcome isolation but the price of a Europe-first policy was little or no support for Balkan independence struggles.<sup>8</sup> In fact, after Russia's defeat in the Crimean War, the new Russian Foreign Minister, Alexander Mikhailovich Gorchakov, adopted the notion of *recullement* as

the cornerstone of his policy. This concept represented Gorchakov's recognition of the need to relinquish, at least temporarily, an aggressive foreign policy and redirect Russia's resources and energies toward domestic reforms that had become glaringly evident during the Crimean War.<sup>9</sup> One-and-a-half centuries later the Russians faced the same dilemma in the Balkans, and once again placed their interests in southeastern Europe on hold while they attempted to deal with economic and political chaos at home.

In the post Crimean War period, the idea of Pan-Slavism began to take root among Russian intellectuals, politicians and diplomats. One example of this took place in Bulgaria. Russian consular officials, serving in the Balkans, regardless of official policy, fraternized with the small groups of Bulgarian revolutionaries and openly sympathized over the failed uprisings in Nis (1841) and in Vidin (1850).<sup>10</sup> For the next two decades Russian policy towards Bulgaria was to discourage any drive for independence. During the 1860s and 1870s, the Russian government went so far as to pressure Romanian authorities not to harbor Bulgarian revolutionary *chetas* who used Romanian territory as a base from which to mount raids across the Danube and incite insurrection in Bulgaria.<sup>11</sup> Russia followed this policy as late as the Bulgarian rebellion of 1876.

Russian reluctance to take a more active part in support of Bulgarian nationalism was further reinforced by the fact that the "young" or radical faction led the majority of the Bulgarian revolutionaries in the mid-1800s. Some of the leaders of this organization such as Khristo Botev and Stephen Stambulov, advocated leftist and nihilist ideas that they had acquired as students in Russia.<sup>12</sup> This hardly endeared the Bulgarian nationalist movement to the Tsar and his ministers and undoubtedly contributed to the lukewarm policies of the Russian government toward the Bulgarian revolutionary movement in its early stages. Finally, the Russian government was not willing to support any Balkan liberation movement that it did not control.<sup>13</sup>

All this changed with the great Eastern Crisis of 1875-1878, which confounded European relations for the rest of the century and prepared the ground for the political consternation and trag-

edy that have dogged the region, with brief respites, ever since. The Eastern Crisis took place because Ottoman decay was irreversible, especially after the empire had become hostage to European financial houses. The empire's voodoo economics were incomprehensible by any acceptable standard and became the cancer that ate away at the Ottoman system. In less than two decades, the Sublime Porte was hopelessly indebted to French, British, and Austrian financial institutions so that it was forced to declare de facto bankruptcy in 1875.<sup>14</sup> Between 1853-1875 the Ottoman Empire borrowed close to two hundred million pounds, which by 1875 required 43.9% of the empire's revenues to service.<sup>15</sup> All of these loans were squandered and new loans were acquired to pay the interest on the debt, but these funds were also poorly managed, thus requiring additional borrowing leaving the "sick man" of Europe on the brink of financial suicide.

The consequences of these disastrous fiscal policies left the provincial subjects of the sultan at the mercy of tax farmers who, in turn, tired to squeeze an ever increasing measure of taxes from the overburdened farmers and seized produce in the place of currency. These highhanded policies combined with crop failures resulted in famine in the cities and towns, which further contributed to the erosion of the sultan's authority. Ironically, during this period there were new attempts at reform and modernization but these efforts proved elusive and caused greater disruption in the provinces. The objective of the reforms was to establish equality between the Muslim and Christians in the Empire and through this achieve a secularized Ottoman identity to counter the threat of nationalism. Other reforms included a budget based on the European model, secular schools, a land code guaranteeing the rights of owners and the re-organization of the provincial administration.

The proposition of creating an Ottoman "citizen" imposed from above rather than as a natural process originating from the inhabitants of the Empire backfired. Few Muslim communities were willing to relinquish their superior status in the Empire and the provincial Ottoman establishments resented any attempt that diminished their political prerogatives. The results were cata-



strophic. The Muslims in Herzegovina and Bosnia resisted these changes and the Porte was forced to employ troops to overcome opposition. In the process, Ottoman control over these provinces weakened considerably while the provinces themselves were left devastated in the course of the fighting. The economic collapse of the empire, at the same time, forced the sultan to increase taxes, which caused more untold misery in the provinces and spread the contagion of rebellion amongst the peasants.

After a decade of wide spread unrest and intermittent fighting, in 1875 the Christian peasants in Herzegovina rebelled, followed shortly by those in Bosnia, setting in motion Act One in the Great Eastern Crisis. None of the European Powers were inclined to intervene, and all preferred to maintain the *status quo* in the Balkans. Had the Bosnian crisis remained an isolated incident, the Great Powers would have been able to avoid dealing with the Eastern Question. Unfortunately for them, the rebellions in Bosnia-Herzegovina were followed by uprisings in Bulgaria, Serbia and Montenegro. "Once the Slavs were astir", comments A.J.P. Taylor, "the Russian Government dared not let them fail; Austria-Hungary dared not let them succeed."<sup>16</sup> France, as the primary lender, had a vested interest in preserving the Ottoman Empire, followed closely by Britain, and both got involved in the Balkan crisis to protect their financial investments and their interests in the Near East. The Italians also joined and were willing to fight any battle and support any cause, as long as Italy could be treated as a Great Power.

The primary catalyst for the intervention of the Great Powers was the massacres inflicted against the Bulgarians by Ottoman irregular troops, who spent more time slaughtering innocent civilians than actually fighting the revolutionaries. Although the Bulgarian uprising was crushed in a month, stories of mass killings and torture permeated newspaper accounts of the rebellion. The brutal treatment of the innocent was not exclusive to the Ottomans; the Bulgarian revolutionaries also contributed their share of atrocities but on a smaller scale. The European press, however, focussed only on the activities of the Turks, which had considerable impact on public opinion and ultimately could not be ignored by the Euro-

pean governments. In effect, the atrocities committed by the Turkish irregulars in Bulgaria, not for the last time, internationalized the crisis and created the momentum for intervention.<sup>17</sup>

Russian diplomatic officials posted in the Balkans and in the Ottoman Empire exploited Turkish barbarism by reporting, with considerable detail, the Ottoman massacres in Bulgaria. Regardless of this, the Russian government attempted to cling to the status quo even after the diplomats pleaded that the killings were not legitimate reprisals against the rebels, but atrocities inflicted on innocent Bulgarians who did not participate in the uprising. Both Naidin Gero, the Bulgarian-born Russian vice-consul in Plodiv, as well as Nicholas Pavlovich Ignatiev, the Russian ambassador in Constantinople, stated in their reports that the events in Bulgaria did not represent an organized revolution. Instead, the two diplomats claimed that the unrest in Bulgaria had been incited by the Ottomans as an excuse to consolidate their control over the province.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, reports of the Ottoman massacres in Bulgaria caused outrage and indignation among Russia's Pan-Slavic circles and contributed to the decision of the Russian Government to declare war against the Ottoman Empire in April 1877.

Fundamentally, Russia's reluctance to support the Bulgarians was rooted in Russian determination to maintain European alliances. Especially since southeastern Europe was the weak link in the *Dreikaiserbund*, (The League of the Three Emperors) the tenuous diplomatic understanding arrived at by the rulers of imperial Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia between 1872-1873.<sup>19</sup> The Russian Foreign Ministry under Gorchakov feared that the League of the Three Emperors could collapse over misunderstandings between Russia and the Dual Monarchy concerning the Balkans and leave Russia isolated.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, Gorchakov and his Austro-Hungarian counterpart, Julius Andrassy, attempted to persuade the sultan to implement reforms that would negate foreign intervention.<sup>21</sup> The Ottoman promises, however, amounted to little and the unrest in the Empire's European provinces escalated. By spring 1876, 25,000 men from Serbia and Montenegro were waging a guerrilla war against 30,000 Ottoman troops in a backdrop of atrocities and



counter-atrocities by both sides. Each report and bloody account of the killings inflicted during the course of the fighting highlighted the plight of the Slavs in the Balkans to the Russian public and the influential Pan-Slavic movement agitated for Russian intervention. Tsar Alexander could not resist the tide of Pan-Slavism nor continue to ignore the situation in the Balkans. The Russians were unable to organize a European coalition against the Ottomans, which left them with only one option—a new arrangement and one that offered Balkan spoils to Austria-Hungary.<sup>22</sup>

The Reichstadt Agreement concluded between Russia and the Dual Monarchy in July 1876 effectively had committed Russia to coordinating its Balkan policy with that of its *Dreikaiserbund* partner, Austria-Hungary. The treaty stipulated that in case of an Ottoman defeat, Russia could recover part of Bessarabia and Austria-Hungary could annex some or all of Bosnia. Furthermore, if Serbia and Montenegro were defeated by the Ottomans, southeastern Europe was to return to the *status quo ante bellum*. Should the Serbs prove victorious, then Russia and Austria-Hungary reserved the right to jointly sanction any territorial changes in the region.<sup>23</sup> Only if the Ottoman Empire collapsed did the Russians consider the establishment of an autonomous Bulgaria. Even in that eventuality, Gorchakov and Andrassy agreed that this new entity would not constitute a large Slavic state in the Balkans. To maintain the balance of power in the Balkans and imperial solidarity, Bulgaria's territorial boundaries would be limited and excluded Rumelia or any of the other areas that Bulgarian nationalists had claimed as part of their historical birthright.<sup>24</sup>

Unfortunately, imperial camaraderie would not last forever. Russia's restrained attitude toward Bulgaria had changed significantly by the time the Great Powers organized the Constantinople Conference of Ambassadors in December 1876, in an effort to diffuse the tensions in the Balkans following the defeat of Serbia and Montenegro by the Ottomans. Ignatiev, the Russian delegate, now demanded the creation of a greater Bulgaria, including the Dobruja, Rumelia, most of Macedonia, and the districts around Nis and Kastoria. In addition, a Russian army was to occupy Bulgaria

and remain until an administrative infrastructure was set up in the new state.<sup>25</sup> Lord Salisbury, the head of the British delegation, although he would not go as far as accepting a Greater Bulgaria, encouraged Ignatiev to seek modest changes. Therefore, Ignatiev with Salisbury's support agreed on the division of Bulgaria into an eastern and a western half each one independent and whose total area would be much smaller than the "Greater Bulgaria" originally proposed by Ignatiev. Furthermore, neither of the two regions was to have an outlet to the Aegean.<sup>26</sup> Because of the limitations imposed by Salisbury on the Bulgaria, the Ottomans assumed wrongly that they could count on British support and rejected the sweeping reforms proposed by the Great Powers in Constantinople.

Russia's new Bulgaria policy emerged as one element in a much greater diplomatic *tour de force*. Even as the Constantinople Conference was still in session, the Russians concluded the Budapest Convention with Austria-Hungary. The Budapest Convention was designed to secure Austro-Hungarian consent to Russia's military intervention against the Ottoman Empire. The terms of the convention stipulated that the Dual Monarchy would maintain benevolent neutrality in case of a Russo-Ottoman war and in return, the Austrians could occupy Bosnia-Herzegovina at a time of their own choosing. Significantly, the Convention made no mention of the fate of the Bulgarian lands, aside from the provision that no large Slav state was to be established in the Balkans after the Russian victory.<sup>27</sup> The Convention's ambiguity with regards to Bulgaria as well as Bosnia Herzegovina was the price Russia had to pay to avoid resuscitating the anti-Russian coalition of the Crimean War, while preparing to intervene in the Balkans. In fact, the Budapest and Constantinople conventions irrevocably dissolved the Crimean coalition. The Ottoman atrocities made it impossible for the British to aid the Ottomans; the French were still weak after their defeat by Prussia, while the new German Empire had little interest in the Balkans.<sup>28</sup>

The outbreak of the Russo-Ottoman War in April 1877 paved the way for a major Russian intervention in Bulgaria and the Balkans. In the initial stages of the conflict, the Russian foreign minister, Alex-



ander Gorchakov displayed every intention of acting in conformity with the agreements concluded from 1875 onwards between Russia and the other Great Powers interested in the Balkans, especially Austria-Hungary. Gorchakov also feared that a long war to secure more territory for a new Bulgarian state was dangerous because a prolonged conflict held the potential of foreign intervention and domestic revolutionary unrest in Russia.<sup>29</sup>

These relatively limited objectives underwent modification as the war dragged on into the summer of 1877. Pressure from Pan-Slavic lobby groups, combined with the cavalier manner by which the Russian military dominated Russia's foreign policy, war aims, and peace terms without consulting Gorchakov, resulted in the Russian demand for the establishment of a "Greater Bulgaria." This, in fact, became the principal condition of the post-war settlement with the Ottoman Empire at San Stefano in March 1878.<sup>30</sup> The new Bulgarian state would consist of the territories that corresponded roughly with the "Greater Bulgaria" first advocated by Ignatiev at the Constantinople conference. In addition, Russian government officials were to assist in the organization of the new country's administration, and the Russian army would continue to occupy Bulgaria for a period of two years.<sup>31</sup>

The Tsar's armies, at first, were successful and by June, it appeared that the Russians would conquer all of the Ottoman territories in Europe. Then the future course of events dramatically shifted by an unexpected twist in the war. The Ottoman fortress of Plevna blocked the Russian drive to the south, and prevented the capture of Constantinople. According to Taylor, "Most battles confirm the way that things are going already; Plevna is one of the few engagements which changed the course of history."<sup>32</sup> The Russians finally took the fortress in December, but by this time, the European powers had time to check the Russian momentum and eventually force an armistice. It is unlikely that the Ottoman Empire would have survived in Europe or Asia Minor had the Russians crowned their victory with the conquest of Constantinople. Regardless, of this setback, the Russians achieved a predominant position in Bulgaria and a strong foothold in the Balkans. Even the continued existence

of the Ottoman Empire, at least for a short time, was at the sufferance of Russian policy.

Although the Ottomans grudgingly signed the San Stefano Treaty, it caused a formidable backlash in Europe and a diplomatic crisis. The new territorial order in the Balkans was particularly troubling for Austria-Hungary because it contravened earlier Russo-Austrian agreements stipulating that no large Slav state was to be created in the Balkans.<sup>33</sup> Britain, on the other hand, feared that Bulgaria would be little more than a Russian pawn in the region that would give the Russians access to the Mediterranean and control of Southeastern Europe.<sup>34</sup> Opposition was equally strong from the other Balkan states. By insisting on the creation of a Greater Bulgaria, Russia effectively alienated Greece and Serbia. The former resented the incorporation into Bulgaria of territories that were historically part of Greece.<sup>35</sup> The Serbs, for their part, were just as disappointed with Russia's decision to give Bulgaria areas conquered by Serbian troops during that country's second war with the Ottoman Empire in 1877–1878.<sup>36</sup>

Russia's hegemony in the Balkans was temporary and shortly diminished by the Congress of Berlin (June–July 1878), which averted a European war by altering the provisions of the Treaty of San Stefano (March 1878). The Congress itself was mainly ceremonial, since most of the agreements finalized in Berlin had been worked out between the Great Powers in advance. Regardless, representatives from the small Balkan states as well as from states in the process of being created scurried to Berlin with the hope of gaining additional territory. The meetings in Berlin also presented an opportunity to grandstand and humiliate the smaller states. The Serbs request for an opportunity to make a presentation of their demands was rejected and they were only permitted to submit a written document that the delegates were assured by their host they could ignore. The Albanians failed to make any impression, while the Greeks, who were admitted to the Congress, literally put some of the delegates to sleep. According to Count Corti, one of the Italian delegates, even the principal supporters of Greece, Salisbury, Beaconsfield and Waddington, "slept the sleep of the just" during



the Greek presentation.<sup>37</sup> Although one of the objectives was to maintain the Ottoman Empire, the Great Powers could not ignore the obvious and granted official recognition to Serbia, Montenegro, and Romania. This did not prevent them from awarding Bessarabia, which was part of Romania, to Russia.

Bulgaria was divided into three sections. An autonomous Bulgarian principality north of the Balkan range that included Sofia came into existence, but the province of Eastern Rumelia remained under Ottoman suzerainty, and Macedonia, was returned to the Ottoman Empire.<sup>38</sup> In other words, the Bulgarians got half of the territory they claimed. The Treaty of Berlin allowed Russia to maintain its influence in Bulgaria, but that was feeble compensation for the loss of Serbian, Greek, and Romanian sympathy, and return to isolation.<sup>39</sup> Even Russia's influence in Bulgaria quickly eroded. Frictions between Russia and its Balkan protégé began to arise after the selection of Alexander of Battenberg as Bulgaria's ruler. Alexander, who had served with the Russian army against the Ottomans in the war of 1877–1878, held the Russians in low esteem because of their inefficient conduct of that war.<sup>40</sup> The feeling was mutual on the part of the Russians. They resented Alexander and his Bulgarian allies because the young ruler stubbornly placed Bulgaria's interest ahead of Russia's. In 1885, Alexander further exasperated the Russians by unilaterally reuniting Eastern Rumelia with Bulgaria, thus cheating Tsar Alexander III of achieving the same ends under Russia's tutelage. To make matters worse, the Great Powers accepted the inevitable and confirmed the new territorial arrangement in Bulgaria. In a reversal of roles, the Russians now appealed to the international community to enforce the Berlin Treaty for the sake of the Ottoman Empire. Although Germany and Austria-Hungary, Russia's *Dreikaiserbund* partners, backed Russia's position, the British endorsed the unification.<sup>41</sup> In fact, the British policy now believed that a large Bulgaria, made expedient through the personal union of Bulgaria and Romania under Alexander of Battenberg, was a better prospect. The British were convinced that a Greater Bulgaria with an anti-Russian prince on the throne would be an effective barrier against future Russian designs on Constan-

tinople and the Straits than the unfortified Eastern Rumelia under Ottoman suzerainty.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, the Russians were stymied. The Great Powers accepted the unification, essentially because it was not a Russian initiative therefore it was in keeping with the spirit of the Berlin settlement—maintaining the *status quo* in the Near East. Clearly, change was acceptable as long as the Ottoman Empire survived and Russian ambitions were checked in the Balkans and the Near East.

This state of affairs may have suited the Europeans, but for the Balkans, the Congress of Berlin was the harbinger of future conflict. The secret and open agreements before and during the final settlement in the German capital reconfigured the Balkans in such a way as to guarantee another war in the region and create friction between the Great Powers. Bosnia and Herzegovina were handed over to Austria-Hungary as part of the diplomatic manoeuvring by the British to preserve the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire and keep the Russians away from the Straits and Constantinople.<sup>43</sup> The British had secured German and Austro-Hungarian agreement for a truncated Bulgaria and in exchange supported the Austrian claim to Bosnia. In turn, the British took over Cyprus from the Ottomans thus planting the seeds for future Greek-Turkish conflicts in the Aegean. The British justified their occupation of Cyprus as part of their “onerous obligation of a defensive alliance with Turkey.”<sup>44</sup> With a stroke of the pen, the Great Powers in Berlin inadvertently guaranteed that southeastern Europe would repeat the Great Eastern Crisis almost in every subsequent generation rendering the Balkans a metaphor for ethnic conflict and mass atrocities.

Fundamentally, the Berlin settlement addressed the security issues of western Europe and indirectly those of central Asia; the interests of the Balkan states, if considered at all, were secondary. In 1878, the Great Powers shuffled land and peoples in the region with little regard for future consequences. In Bismarck's words “the borders of Montenegro and Serbia, and places of which no one ever heard before”<sup>45</sup> were not relevant. The overlapping and contradictory national territories that reflected the emerging Balkan states



guaranteed instability, but that was not a consideration in Berlin. Remarkably, the disposition of Macedonia, perhaps the critical issue that doomed the region as a zone of conflict was not even taken up seriously at the Berlin Congress. The Great Powers were satisfied to return Macedonia back to the Ottoman Empire and then proceeded to forget about it. Yet the region was a miniature version of the Balkans; a mosaic of Muslim, Greek, Bulgarian, Serb, Albanian, Vlach, Jewish and Gypsy communities. Furthermore, Macedonia straddled communications between east and west as well as north and south. Thessaloniki, the largest city in the Ottoman province with a predominant Sephardic Jewish population, was the largest port in southeastern Europe. In all, Macedonia represented a strategic hub crucial to Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, and the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, the subsequent actions of the Balkan states and resources were committed to acquiring this territory almost at any cost. For the Europeans, Macedonia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was part and parcel of the overall Ottoman problem, in as much as in the present it is less a by-product of Yugoslav disintegration than a potential flash point for a Bulgarian, Albanian, Greek, and Turkish crisis.

Meanwhile, even before the ink was dry on the Berlin Treaty, the competition for territory dominated the inter-state relations of the Balkans. The Albanians were the first to react to the changes implemented at their expense by the Great Powers. Abandoned by the Ottomans and ignored by the Congress of Berlin, the Albanians opted for their own nationalist struggle and attempted to defend Albanian lands awarded to Montenegro by the Great Powers. From 1878 until 1881, the Albanians fought against a coalition of Montenegrin, Serb, and Ottoman forces but were finally defeated. The Ottomans, albeit pressured by the Great Powers to enforce the Berlin agreement, had little compunction in killing their former loyal subjects. In July, the Austro-Hungarians had to deploy over a quarter of a million troops to occupy the Ottoman province. Sarajevo exploded in violence as the Muslims tried to deny the city to the Dual Monarchy. Serbs who opposed Austro-Hungarian occupation also joined the Muslims in some parts of Bosnia. Fighting

continued until October of 1878 when the Austrians managed to subdue the rebels.

Resistance to foreign rule was not over in Bosnia or Albanian, rather the struggle for independence transformed and alternated between guerrilla war in the mountains and sabotage and subversion in the cities. Guerrilla warfare was endemic to the Balkans and aided by the rugged terrain. The urban struggle, however, was an innovation implemented by small groups of revolutionaries who relied on the bomb, assassination, extortion, retribution and fear as weapons of war. The tactics of terror achieved their full measure in Macedonia, which over the next thirty years was the target of political intrigue and destabilization directed from the Balkan capitals. The shift from conventional battles to irregular warfare also offered the widest possible latitude for the Balkan states to pursue irredentist policies in the absence of large military establishments.

In the autumn of 1885, Serbia invaded Bulgaria, ostensibly because the Serbs were not compensated after Bulgaria acquired Eastern Rumelia. The underlying objectives of the war, however, were for Serbia to attain an advantageous position in order to claim Macedonia and prevent Bulgaria from incorporating the Ottoman province. In less than one week, the Serbian army was defeated and fell back across the Bulgarian frontier. Serbia was saved only by the intervention of Austria-Hungary who threatened war unless the Bulgarian forces withdrew from Serbian territory. The first round of the competition for territorial space went to Bulgaria; the Serbs then switched tactics and began infiltrating guerrilla bands in Macedonia.

In the aftermath of the Congress of Berlin and deprived of a firm foothold in southeastern Europe, Russia temporarily shifted the focus of its foreign policy toward ventures in Central Asia and the Far East.<sup>46</sup> The Russians avoided isolation in Europe by joining the reconstituted Emperors League in 1881. In May 1897, in the context of the Goluchowski-Murayev Agreement, Russia and Austria-Hungary agreed to maintain the *status quo* in the Balkans and to co-operate in preventing any other power from acquiring territory in the region. With the Russian-Austrian rivalry in the Balkans sus-



pending for the time being, the rulers of the Dual Monarchy could focus on solving Austria-Hungary's domestic problems, while Russia was free to pursue its designs in the Far East.<sup>47</sup> Both powers demonstrated their desire to avoid complications in the Balkans by dealing with the Macedonian Question through the Muerzsteg Agreement, which attempted to reduce ethnic tensions in Macedonia through gradual Ottoman reforms.<sup>48</sup> The Russian government was still reluctant to support revolutionary upheavals in the region or become involved in another Balkan crisis incited by movements that it could not control.

The turn of the century also witnessed a revival of friendly relations between Bulgaria and Russia. Bulgaria's new ruler, Ferdinand of Coburg, who had replaced Alexander of Battenberg in 1887, was able to normalize the relationship in Russia by 1896 when official diplomatic ties were re-established between the two countries. The unfortunate Alexander had faced the ignominy of being kidnapped by Bulgarian officers loyal to Russia and after his release was ordered by the czar to abdicate. By 1902, Russia and Bulgaria had concluded a secret military alliance designed to counteract a similar Austro-Romanian agreement. Nevertheless, a degree of suspicion persisted between Russia and Bulgaria, and it was clear that the Russians could not be counted upon by the Bulgarians to endorse their ambitions with respect to Macedonia. Russia's unwillingness to create an international crisis in the Balkans meant that Bulgarian designs in the region would not advance substantially irrespective of reconciliation with Russia.<sup>49</sup>

Russia's position in southeastern Europe improved even further in the first years of the twentieth century with the establishment of closer economic and military links between Serbia and Bulgaria. The 1903 coup that overthrew Alexander Obrenovic and brought Peter Karadjordjevic to the throne meant that a monarch unacceptable to Austria-Hungary ruled Serbia. Consequently, the Serbs gravitated even closer to Bulgaria. Between April 1904-June 1905, the two Balkan states signed a series of political, military and economic treaties, including an agreement that called for the establishment of a customs union by 1917. Many contemporary observers

interpreted the latter provision as the first step toward the emergence of a South Slav state that would serve as a barrier against Austro-Hungarian expansion and influence in southeastern Europe.<sup>50</sup>

The rapprochement between Serbia and Bulgaria provided a base for Russian intrigues, initiated after the Bosnian Crisis of 1908-1909, to organize a league of Balkan states whose goal would be to block Austro-Hungarian ambitions in southeastern Europe. After 1909, the 1897 agreement that committed Russia and the Dual Monarchy to maintaining the *status quo* in the Balkans had become a dead letter following Austria-Hungary's decision to annex Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Austro-Hungarians had acted so quickly to formally incorporate the territories, that the Russians had little time or opportunity to obtain suitable diplomatic compensation. Sergei Sazonov, Russian foreign minister since October 1910, instructed Nicholas Hartwig and Anatol Nekliudov, the Russian ministers in Belgrade and Sofia respectively, to encourage the governments of the two Balkan states to establish even closer diplomatic ties.<sup>51</sup> This was a difficult proposition since Serbia and Bulgaria held divergent views on the future disposition of Macedonia.

The Serbs favored a partition of the territory amongst the Balkan states, but the Bulgarians advocated granting Macedonia autonomy as a prelude to annexation by Bulgaria. Earlier attempts at a closer Serbo-Bulgarian alliance had foundered on this issue.<sup>52</sup> What encouraged the Bulgarians to compromise on the matter was their unwillingness to accept the Russian proposal to include the Ottoman Empire in the new Balkan alliance under the aegis of Russia. A Russian-Ottoman agreement would invariably deprive Bulgaria of opportunities for pursuing an aggressive policy in Macedonia or to exercise pressure on the Ottomans with regards to the implementation of reforms in the contested region.<sup>53</sup>

The Bulgarians, at last, agreed with the Serbian suggestion for partitioning Macedonia after they had convinced themselves that they could quickly defeat the Ottomans and occupy the entire region thus precluding any division of the spoils with the Serbs. Furthermore, the successful Italian attack against Ottoman Libya in September 1911 signalled the imminent collapse of the empire



and paved the way for a Balkan alliance.<sup>54</sup> On 13 March 1912, Serbia and Bulgaria concluded a secret treaty, followed by a military convention in April. Both countries agreed to the division of Macedonia into Bulgarian and Serbian zones, and a contested zone whose ownership was to be mediated by the Russian czar.<sup>55</sup> In May, Bulgaria signed a treaty of alliance with Greece. The Greeks had refused to accept an autonomous Macedonia, but the pace of events forced the Balkan allies to postpone the disposition of Macedonia until the end of a future war.<sup>56</sup> Montenegro also concluded treaties with Bulgaria and Serbia completing the formation of the Balkan League.<sup>57</sup>

Unfortunately for the Czar's Government, the form that the Balkan Alliance had taken did not resemble the arrangement envisioned by Russia. Far from becoming a barrier to Austria-Hungary, the Balkan League was a military and diplomatic understanding exclusively directed against the Ottoman Empire. In effect, prelude to a war. By September 1912, the Russian government, still not wishing to see the Balkans explode into another international crisis, resorted to co-operating with Austria-Hungary in an effort to prevent the Balkan allies from going to war against the Ottomans. In a joint statement issued by Russia and the Dual Monarchy on behalf of the other Great Powers of Europe, the Balkan states were warned that any change to territorial arrangements in Southeastern Europe would not be tolerated. At the same time, to mitigate this warning, Russia and Austria-Hungary promised to continue exerting pressure on the Porte to implement internal reforms in Macedonia.<sup>58</sup> This meant little to the Balkan allies who were less interested in Ottoman reforms, than to annex Macedonia.

Time was running out for the Balkans Allies. The Italians had expanded the war against the Porte in the Aegean and the Straits, and there was a clear danger that the Great Powers might recognize the remaining four Ottoman *vilayets* in Albania as an autonomous entity.

Despite the failure to agree on the future division of Macedonia, the Balkan Allies proceed to wage initiate hostilities against the Ottoman Empire.<sup>59</sup> In early October 1912, Montenegro invoked a

long-standing border dispute with the Ottomans and declared war. Subsequently, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece joined on the grounds that the Porte had failed to implement reforms in Macedonia as stipulated by the Treaty of Berlin in 1878. The Balkan Allies achieved spectacular success on the battlefield and defeated the Sultan's forces in southeastern Europe. Yet all was not well. Bulgaria's advance on the eastern front brought the Bulgarian army close to Constantinople, which alarmed the Russians. The Russians would not and could not accept a Bulgarian occupation of the Ottoman capital—the liberation of Constantinople was to be reserved for Russia. As a result, the Russians abandoned the Bulgarians and left them to the mercy of their allies. In the first Balkan War (1912) Greece, Serbia, and Montenegro expanded their territories at the expense first of the Ottomans but that what not the case with Bulgaria.

The Bulgarians, finding little of the spoils they had assumed were entitled to them after the successful war against the Ottoman Empire in 1913, attacked their former allies, but were soundly defeated during the course of a month-long conflict.<sup>60</sup> The Romanians also joined the war against Bulgaria, while the Ottomans taking advantage of the situation managed to reoccupy Eastern Thrace. The Treaty of Bucharest (10 August 1913), which ended the Second Balkan War awarded Serbia the lion's share of Ottoman Macedonia, while Greece acquired the rest of Macedonia and Western Thrace, including the port of Thessaloniki. Bulgaria, although defeated, still got a narrow strip of Macedonia along the coast and Eastern Thrace but not enough to satisfy national appetites. The Treaty of Bucharest was not submitted to the Great Powers and as A.J.P. Taylor has written after the Balkan Wars, "The Balkan States had become truly independent; they were nobody's satellites".<sup>61</sup> Although the Eastern Question continued to confound and set the Great Powers against each other until 1923, its primary focus, for the most part, shifted from the Balkans to the Near East.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup>André Gerolymatos, *The Balkan Wars: Conquest, Revolution and Retribution from the Ottoman Era to the Twentieth Century*, New York, 2002, p. 196.

<sup>2</sup>Gerolymatos, *The Balkan War*, p. 196.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>4</sup>Ali's ambitions were dashed by the Treaty of London (15 July 1840), in which Britain, Russia, Prussia and Austria-Hungary forced the pasha to accept hereditary rule over Egypt and nothing else. The French were left out, less because they tried to support Ali's claims and more so because the British used the crisis to ensure their leadership position in European affairs (Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763–1848* (Oxford, 1994, pp. 738–740.

<sup>5</sup>P.J. Vatikiotis, *The History of Egypt*, (Baltimore, 1985); Henry Dodwell, *The Founder of Modern Egypt: A Study of Muhammad Ali*, (Cambridge, 1967), 171.

<sup>6</sup>Barbara Jelavich, *Russia's Balkan Entanglements, 1806–1914* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 159.

<sup>7</sup>Leften Stavrianos, *The Balkans Since 1453* (New York, 1958), pp. 366–367; Richard J. Crampton, *Bulgaria, 1878–1918: A History* (Boulder, Colorado, 1983), pp. 4–7.

<sup>8</sup>B. Jelavich, *Russia's Balkan Entanglements*, pp. 159–160.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 145–146.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., pp. 160–161; Mark Pinson, "Ottoman Bulgaria in the First Tanzimat Period: The Revolts of Nish (1841) and Vidin (1850)," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (May 1975), pp. 103–146.

<sup>11</sup>B. Jelavich, *Balkan Entanglements*, p. 163.

<sup>12</sup>Stavrianos, *The Balkans*, pp. 378–375; Crampton, *Bulgaria*, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup>B. Jelavich, *Balkan Entanglements*, p. 163.

<sup>14</sup>Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (London, 1968, p. 159.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 446–47.

<sup>16</sup>A.J.P. Taylor, *Struggle for the Mastery of Europe, 1848–1918*, Oxford, 1971, p. 229.

<sup>17</sup>Gerolymatos, *The Balkan War*, p. 201.

<sup>18</sup>Taylor, *Struggle for the Mastery of Europe*, pp. 168–169.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 219–220.

<sup>20</sup>Stavrianos, *The Balkans*, p. 394.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 400; Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery*, p. 234; M. S. Anderson, *The Eastern Question, 1774–1923* (London, 1966), p. 182.

<sup>22</sup>Taylor, *The Struggle for the Mastery*, p. 241.

<sup>23</sup>The Serbian-Ottoman war ended on February 17, 1877. The re-organized and better-trained Ottoman forces routed the Serb armies very quickly. A complete collapse was averted after the Russian government warned the Porte that unless

the Ottomans agreed to an armistice Russia would intervene on behalf of the Serbs.

<sup>24</sup>Anderson, *The Eastern Question*, pp. 185–186; B. Jelavich, *Balkan Entanglements*, p. 171; Stavrianos, pp. 404–406; Taylor, pp. 237–238.

<sup>25</sup>B. Jelavich, p. 171; Anderson, *The Eastern Question*, p. 191.

<sup>26</sup>Stavrianos, *The Balkans*, p. 405.

<sup>27</sup>Taylor, *Struggle for the Mastery of Europe*, pp. 242–244; Stavrianos, p. 406; Anderson, *The Eastern Question*, p. 193.

<sup>28</sup>Anderson, *The Eastern Question*, pp. 239–241; Taylor, *Struggle for the Mastery of Europe*, pp. 239–242 and p. 239, note 2.

<sup>29</sup>Anderson, *The Eastern Question*, p. 195.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., pp. 195–196, 199.

<sup>31</sup>B. Jelavich, *Russia's Balkan Entanglement*, p. 175.

<sup>32</sup>Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery*, p. 245.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 176.

<sup>34</sup>Stavrianos, *The Balkans*, p. 409.

<sup>35</sup>Charles Jelavich, *Tsarist Russia and Balkan Nationalism: Russian Influence and the Internal Affairs of Bulgaria and Serbia, 1879–1880* (Los Angeles, 1972), p. 11.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 12–13.

<sup>37</sup>W.N. Medlicott, *The Congress of Berlin and After: A Diplomatic History of the Near Eastern Settlement, 1878–1880* (London: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd.) p. 89.

<sup>38</sup>Anderson, *The Eastern Question*, p. 211.

<sup>39</sup>C. Jelavich, *Tsarist Russia*, p. 13.

<sup>40</sup>Anderson, *The Eastern Question*, p. 228. The prince was not alone in his dislike of Bulgaria's liberators. The Bulgarians themselves were resentful of Russia's tendency to meddle in domestic Bulgarian politics. They were indignant over the predominance of Russians in the officer corps of the Bulgarian army—all ranks of above captain were held by Russians B. Jelavich, *Russia's Balkan Entanglement*, pp. 182–183.

<sup>41</sup>B. Jelavich, *Russia's Balkan Entanglement*, p. 187.

<sup>42</sup>Stavrianos, *The Balkans*, p. 432; Anderson, *The Eastern Question*, pp. 320–231.

<sup>43</sup>Taylor, *The Struggle for the Mastery*, p. 250.

<sup>44</sup>Medlicott, *The Congress of Berlin*, pp. 112–114. The Greeks accepted the transfer of Cyprus to Britain in the mistaken belief that eventually it would make easier for them to acquire the island from the British.

<sup>45</sup>Medlicott, *The Congress of Berlin*, p. 38.

<sup>46</sup>B. Jelavich, *Tsarist Russia*, p. 195.

<sup>47</sup>Stavrianos, *The Balkans*, p. 522.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 523.



<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 440.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., pp. 523–524.

<sup>51</sup>B. Jelavich, *Russia's Balkan Entanglement*, pp. 228–229; Edward C. Thaden, *Russia and the Balkan Alliance of 1912* (University Park, 1965), pp. 65–81.

<sup>52</sup>Richard J. Crampton, *Bulgaria, 1878–1918; A History* (Boulder Colo.: East European Monographs, 1983), p. 406.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 407.

<sup>54</sup>Steven K. Pavlowitch, *A History of the Balkans, 1804–1945* (New York, 1999) p. 196.

<sup>55</sup>Andrew Rossos, *Russia and the Balkans: Inter-Balkan Rivalry and Russian Foreign Policy, 1908–1914* (Toronto, 1981), pp. 45–46; Ernst C. Helmreich, *The Diplomacy of the Balkan Wars, 1912–1913* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1938), pp. 53–57.

<sup>56</sup>Pavlowitch, *A History of the Balkans*, p. 197.

<sup>57</sup>Stavrianos, *The Balkans*, p. 533.

<sup>58</sup>B. Jelavich, *Russia's Balkan Entanglement*, p. 231–232.

<sup>59</sup>Ernst C. Helmreich, *The Diplomacy of the Balkan Wars, 1912–1913* (Cambridge, 1938), pp. 75–77.

<sup>60</sup>The Treaty of London (30 May 1913), which ended the First Balkan War, awarded most of Macedonia, the territory coveted by Bulgaria to Greece and Serbia. The Treaty, under pressure from the Austro-Hungarians, declared Albania an independent state, although most of its territory had been occupied by Greece and Serbia—both Balkan states grudgingly withdrew their forces.

<sup>61</sup>Taylor, *The Struggle for the Mastery of Europe*, p. 498.

## Utopian Dream or Lost Opportunity? A Tripartite Commission to Rehabilitate Postwar Greece

John O. Iatrides

The unique wartime coalition that Winston Churchill labeled “The Grand Alliance”<sup>1</sup> proved successful despite conflicting national interests and priorities, mutual suspicions and rivalries, and endless stresses and strains of every kind. Much has been written about friction between the Soviet Union and its two principal western allies. Less attention has been paid to a variety of disagreements in Anglo-American relations which surfaced despite the close personal relationship between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill and the cooperation they and their principal advisers achieved in the war effort.

The issues that tested the alliance included the fate of many nations of East-Central Europe which in the course of the war had suffered enormous devastation and whose future as free and independent states was anything but certain as their region appeared destined to fall under Soviet control. One such country was Greece, Britain's ally from the earliest days of the war against the Axis powers. The brutal occupation by German, Italian and Bulgarian armies, the collapse of the prewar dictatorship and the splintering of the country's political forces had left the nation in ruins and raised the specter of anarchy, widespread poverty and political violence which the two western Allies could not ignore. A review of the