THE BALKAN WARS OF 1912-13 AND ETHNIC STABILIZATION IN SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

The Balkan Wars of 1912-13 represent a milestone in the transformation of Southeastern Europe. From a region managed on the basis of multiculturalism under Ottoman authority, an area of nationalist states emerged. While this process was already well underway before the Balkan Wars, by their completion the process of the nationalization of Southeastern Europe had become assured. This article investigates the demise of the Ottoman system and its aftermath, highlighting the historical roots of still ongoing disputes in the region.

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T he Balkan Wars of 1912-13 were two short but bloody conflicts in the Balkan Peninsula (or, more generally, Southeastern Europe) that preceded, and in many ways initiated, the First World War. In the First Balkan War of 1912-13, a loose coalition consisting of Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro, and Serbia fought against the Ottoman Empire in order to realize these countries' nationalist objectives. The Balkan alliance triumphed over the Ottomans, but failed to resolve disputes among themselves over the division of Ottoman territories. In the Second Balkan War of 1913, Bulgaria fought its erstwhile Greek, Montenegrin, and Serbian allies, mainly over Macedonia. While the Bulgarian armies were heavily engaged in the west, Ottoman and Romanian forces seized specific Bulgarian objectives in the east of the country.

The Greeks and Serbs were the big winners of the Balkan Wars; the Bulgarians and Ottomans were the big losers. For the inhabitants of this region, the Balkan Wars were the first stage of a larger conflict that persisted until the First World War ended in 1918. These wars represent an important milestone in the transformation of the Balkan Peninsula from a region of multiethnic empires, in which diverse communities functioned separately from one another, to one of national states in which a central authority imposed a degree of cultural and political conformity on most of the communities under its control. This process would continue throughout the 20th century.

Ethnic communities in the Balkans have undergone considerable change over the past two thousand years. Waves of migrations from the east and northeast established Slavic and Turkic peoples among older groups, such as the antecedents of modern Albanians, Greeks, and Romanians. Inevitably a certain amount of hybridization occurred. Modern Bulgarians developed from Slavic and Turkic origins. Contemporary Romanians emerged from Latin, Dacian, and Slavic interactions. The location of these peoples in Southeastern Europe was fluid until early modern times. Byzantine policy often resettled various groups throughout the region to pacify both peoples and territories. The Byzantine Macedonian dynasty, which ruled the empire in strength from 867 to 1025, arose from Anatolian Armenians settled in the south central region of the Balkans in order to strengthen the rule of Constantinople among the Slavic peoples that had migrated there, and to dilute the heterodox religious tendencies of the Armenians in their homeland. Byzantine law was basically Christianized Roman law. Access to state resources largely depended upon Christian faith and the ability to speak Greek to some degree. The medieval Orthodox Christian states in Southeastern Europe followed these same principles. As long as these issues were addressed, ethnicity was no obstacle for the implementation of the protection of state authority.

The Ottoman conquest, beginning in the 14th century, brought further ethnic diversification to the region. Turks settled in several areas south of the Danube River, including modern Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Dobrudzha. Other Islamic peoples also moved into these regions, such as Tatars and Circassians. Around the same time, significant numbers of Roma migrated into Southeastern Europe. To cope with the resulting cultural and ethnic diversity, the Ottomans devised the *millet* system, which permitted Muslims, Orthodox Christians, Armenian Monophysite (Gregorian) Christians, Jews, and later Roman Catholics and Protestants their own legal apparatus and laws. Islamic law, however, took precedence over these others and served as the legal basis for the Ottoman state. The *millet* system permitted the growth and coexistence of diverse ethnic communities under Ottoman authority throughout the Balkans. It also tended to limit interactions among the various communities. Because the involvement of Ottoman authorities in intercommunity disputes required the payment of fees or taxes, the various *millet*s often tended to seek resolution among themselves without reference to these authorities. Thus, different cultural and ethnic communities could coexist under Ottoman rule without regular interaction. Sometimes specific circumstances could facilitate cooperation among these groups. The Nobel Prize winning novelist Ivo Andrić's (1892-1975) novel *The Bridge on the Drina* provides several good examples of such intercommunity cooperation under Ottoman rule in the Bosnian town of Višegrad.[1] Nevertheless such instances of cooperation usually occurred only in the case of extreme circumstances such as epidemics or floods.

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By the end of the 18th century, however, the Western European model of nationalism began to challenge the Ottoman arrangement of cultural management in Southeastern Europe. Based upon the rationalist concepts of the Enlightenment and the peninsular geography of Western Europe, this model offered a unified political and legal system based upon common language and cultural norms. The economic prosperity and political strength of Western European nation-states, especially France, provided a positive reinforcement for the adoption of the national concept in Southeastern Europe. These ideas first appeared in Habsburg lands among the Romanian populations of Transylvania and the Serbian populations of the Military Frontier, a privileged administrative region which bordered on the Ottoman Empire.

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1 Ivo Andrić, *The Bridge on the Drina* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

The efforts of Habsburg ruler Joseph II (1741-1790) instituted policies in these regions based upon rationalist Enlightenment concepts. By the beginning of the 19th century, Greeks had also begun to embrace this concept. A major advantage of this system was that it permitted a central authority to enhance its power through common education and service obligations.

> *"First the Serbs, then the Greeks and Romanians, and finally the Bulgarians struggled against Ottoman authority to realize nation-states."*

Throughout the 19th century, the concept of nationalism was strengthened in the Balkans. First the Serbs, then the Greeks and Romanians, and finally the Bulgarians struggled against Ottoman authority to realize nation-states. Often, the Islamic populations of these new states became unwelcome after the withdrawal of Ottoman authority. Many Muslims, whether of Albanian, Slavic, or Turkish origin, migrated into areas remaining under Ottoman control, either in the Balkans or in Anatolia. None of the new Balkan nation-states were satisfied that their borders included all of their co-nationals. They regarded the establishment of nation-states, including as many as possible members of their nationality, as a fundamental obligation of their national authority. As a result these new nation-states all strove to obtain additional Ottoman territories. Often they competed with each other for cultural, economic, and political influence in the remaining Ottoman regions of Southeastern Europe.

The Balkan Wars of 1912-13 represent the greatest effort of the Balkan states to realize their national objectives against the Ottoman Empire. The Balkan alliance rapidly overcame Ottoman forces. By the end of 1912, almost the entire Balkan Peninsula was in the hands of nation-states. Only the far eastern part of Thrace, the Gallipoli Peninsula, and the three besieged cities of Ionnina (Janina), Edirne (Adrianople/Odrin), and Shkodër (Scutari) remained under Ottoman control. Many of the non-national populations found themselves in difficulty with the new authorities. The invading nationalist armies committed atrocities against civilians on Ottoman territories. All the participants in these events had some blood on their hands. In general, the report issued by the Carnegie Institute in 1914 presents a dispassionate account of these events.[2]

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2 "Report of the International Commission to Inquire into the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan Wars," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (Washington D.C., 1914).

One of the most important consequences of the Balkan Wars was the realization of an Islamic-majority national state in Albania. By the beginning of the 20th century, a sense of Albanian nationalism had emerged. This development of an Albanian national culture overcame religious differences. Many Albanians came to resent the Ottomanization policies of the Constantinople government. In 1910 revolt broke out in Albania, at least partly directed against them. The proclamation of Albanian independence in Vlorë (Valona) on 28 November 1912 was intended to reject Ottoman rule and prevent the imposition of control from the Balkan states. The Great European Powers –especially Austria-Hungary and Italy– strove to protect the new Albanian state from the predations of its Greek, Montenegrin, and Serbian neighbors. The Great Powers exerted themselves because of their own imperialistic agendas, not because of any altruistic impulses towards the Albanian people.

> *"Contemporary nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire overlooks the barriers to the development of modernity imposed by the Ottoman system on the Balkans."*

Another legacy remaining from the Balkan Wars is the issue of Kosovo. The Serbs, and then the Serb-dominated Yugoslav kingdom, attempted to impose a nationalist regime on this largely Albanian-inhabited region. Kosovo was important to the Serbian national mythos as the site of an epic but inconclusive battle in 1389 between medieval Serbian warriors and Ottoman invaders. After the First World War, the Yugoslav government made land in Kosovo available to Serbian war veterans in an effort to build up the Slavic element in the population and thereby dilute the Albanian population. This was not particularly successful. Opposition to Serbian rule arose immediately upon the invasion of the Serbian Army in 1912 and continued on into the 1920s. Kosovo came under Italian/Albanian control in the Second World War, and received autonomy in Tito's post-Second World War Yugoslavia. In the initial stages of the collapse of that state, the central Serbian government reasserted control. Albanian resistance resulted in NATO intervention and the declaration of an independent Kosovo in 2007. The Serbian population and some other minorities in that state, however, remain in a state of siege from Albanian nationalist authorities.

The Balkan Wars also demonstrated that national models were not compatible with each other in Southeastern Europe. To some degree, the territorial claims of the Bulgarians, Greeks, and Serbs derived from the overlapping legacies of medieval

predecessors, as these groups all sought to establish national control in regions that did not always correspond to the national model. This was especially true in multicultural and multilinguistic Macedonia, where these states had long vied with each other and with Ottoman authorities for dominance. Soon after the defeat of the Ottomans, the Balkan allies fought each other over the division of spoils in Macedonia. The subsequent Treaty of Bucharest of August 1913 established a division of Macedonia among Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia (later Yugoslavia) that has become permanent. The contemporary Macedonian state –sometimes called the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)– encompasses only the portion of Macedonia that Serbia obtained in the Treaty of Bucharest. The remainder has succumbed to the homogenizing and nationalizing policies of the Bulgarian and Greek states. The problem of nationalism continues to plague Macedonia. Disputes between the Slavic Macedonian majority and the large Albanian minority in the northwestern part of the state led to armed clashes at the beginning of the 21st century. Fortunately political compromise granting the Albanians considerable cultural and political concessions has eased the conflict for the present.

Conclusion

Both the Ottoman and the nationalist systems of organization developed advantages and disadvantages for the peoples subject to their authority. The Ottoman system permitted different cultures to maintain distinct identities and to coexist with each other within the confines of Ottoman rule. This came at a cost of overt domination by the Islamic community in economic and political issues. It also precluded the establishment of a strong central authority that could draw upon the cooperation of all groups for the positive and negative purposes of the state. The Ottoman system was rife with inefficiency and corruption. Contemporary nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire overlooks the barriers to the development of modernity imposed by the Ottoman system on the Balkans.

The demise of the Ottoman system as a result of the Balkan Wars both strengthened and weakened the nationalist Balkan successor states. The nationalist central authorities in Athens, Belgrade, and Sofia were able to impose a certain uniformity on the peoples under their control. They lost, however, a vital diversity. The process of assimilation, greatly facilitated by the development of a modern infrastructure and the spread of modern technologies, continues up through the present day.

The Balkan Wars were an important step in the process of the modernization of Southeastern Europe. It confirmed the triumph of Western European ideas, especially the Enlightenment, in this region. The concept of nationalism, born in

the relatively homogeneous peninsular geography of Western Europe, did not fit precisely in the cultural, ethnical, and geographical complexities of the Balkan Peninsula. Nevertheless, for the past century, the nationalization of the Balkan Peninsula has proceeded. It slowed during the *Pax Sovietica* of 1945-89, but was revived upon the collapse of Communist ideology, especially in the former Yugoslav lands. Throughout this period many different groups found their unique identities eroded or lost to the relentless nationalization of Southeastern Europe. Perhaps in time, with the unification of Europe within the European Union, a more inclusive model may emerge.