

Warfare and History



THE BALKAN WARS 1912–1913

Prelude to the First World War

Richard C. Hall

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THE BALKAN WARS
1912–1913

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THE BALKAN WARS

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PREFACE

The complex and obscure Balkan Wars of 1912–13 represent the beginning of an era in European history dominated by nationalism and conflict. These wars were the first concerted effort by the Balkan peoples to emulate the Italian and German examples and establish large nationalist states. The Great Powers of Europe soon intervened. They helped shape the resolution and settlement of the Balkan Wars. The settlement reconfigured the borders of the Balkan Peninsula, expanding the south Slavic states, Greece, and Romania. Bulgaria obtained the Rhodope mountains and western Thrace; Greece took most of Epius; Greece and Serbia divided most of the greatly contested region of Macedonia between them; Montenegro and Serbia divided the former Sandjak of Novi Pazar; and Serbia obtained the largely Albanian region of Kosovo. At the same time, an independent Albania emerged and the multinational Ottoman Empire almost disappeared from the European continent. Because of overlapping rivalries and claims, the nationalist appetites of the post-Balkan War states were not sated. They all persisted in the pursuit of nationalist objectives.

The fighting begun in October 1912 in the Balkan Peninsula had not ended completely by July 1914, when all Europe became enveloped in war. For the peoples of the Balkan Peninsula, the war of 1912 persisted until 1918. Many Balkan War battlefields endured further fighting. Bulgaria occupied most of Macedonia. The Great Powers intervened again. Austro-Hungarian, British, French, German, Italian, and Russian soldiers all fought Balkan battles. At the end of the war, Bulgaria lost Macedonia and western Thrace, and Serbia achieved a maximalist nationalist program with the incorporation of the south Slavic regions of Austria-Hungary, including Bosnia, and Montenegro, into a Serbian-dominated Yugoslavia. Albania barely re-emerged as an independent state.

The Balkan states had little time to recover after the conclusion of fighting in 1918. A mere twenty years separated the First World War from the Second World War. Italy annexed Albania in 1939. The war spread to the Balkans the next year. Yugoslavia collapsed in a week under German and Italian attack in 1941. Italian-dominated Albania annexed Kosovo, and Bulgaria reoccupied Macedonia and western Thrace. Battles of various sizes and intensities again

PREFACE

raged across the Balkan Peninsula for the next five years. Soldiers from Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union participated in the fighting. When the war was over, Yugoslavia was restored and most of the peninsula was under Soviet domination.

The Communist regimes that emerged in the shadow of Soviet Russia finally brought a period of peace to the Balkan Peninsula. The issues raised by the Balkan Wars lay dormant during the years of Communist rule, only to revive with the collapse of those regimes in 1990. Nationalist wars again erupted there, and continued until the last year of the twentieth century. As with most of the Balkan fighting of the twentieth century, the wars of the disintegration of Yugoslavia drew the diplomatic and military intervention of larger and stronger powers. Albania lurched towards anarchy, Kosovo became a battlefield, and the viability of the post-Yugoslav Macedonian state came into question.

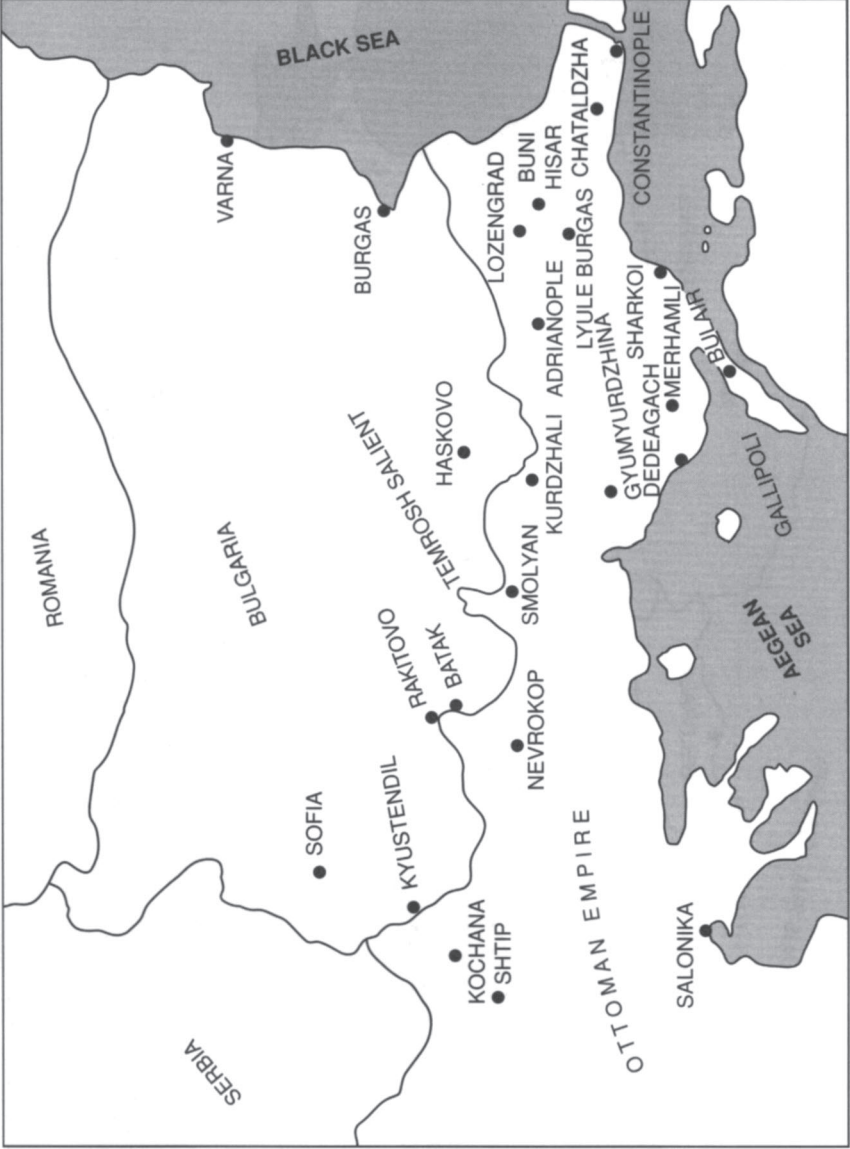
The large nationalist state as exemplified by Italy and Germany proved a poor model for the Balkan peoples. No such states were possible, because the nationalist claims of each Balkan state overlapped with those of its neighbors. Every attempt in the twentieth century to realize this goal has led to war and foreign intervention. Only the adoption of a post-nationalist perspective by the Balkan peoples can break the pattern of war and intervention.

Please note that all dates are given according to the Gregorian or new-style calendar, unless indicated Julian or old style (o.s.). In the twentieth century, the Gregorian calendar was thirteen days ahead of the Julian. All errors of translation are my own.

Richard C.Hall
June 2000



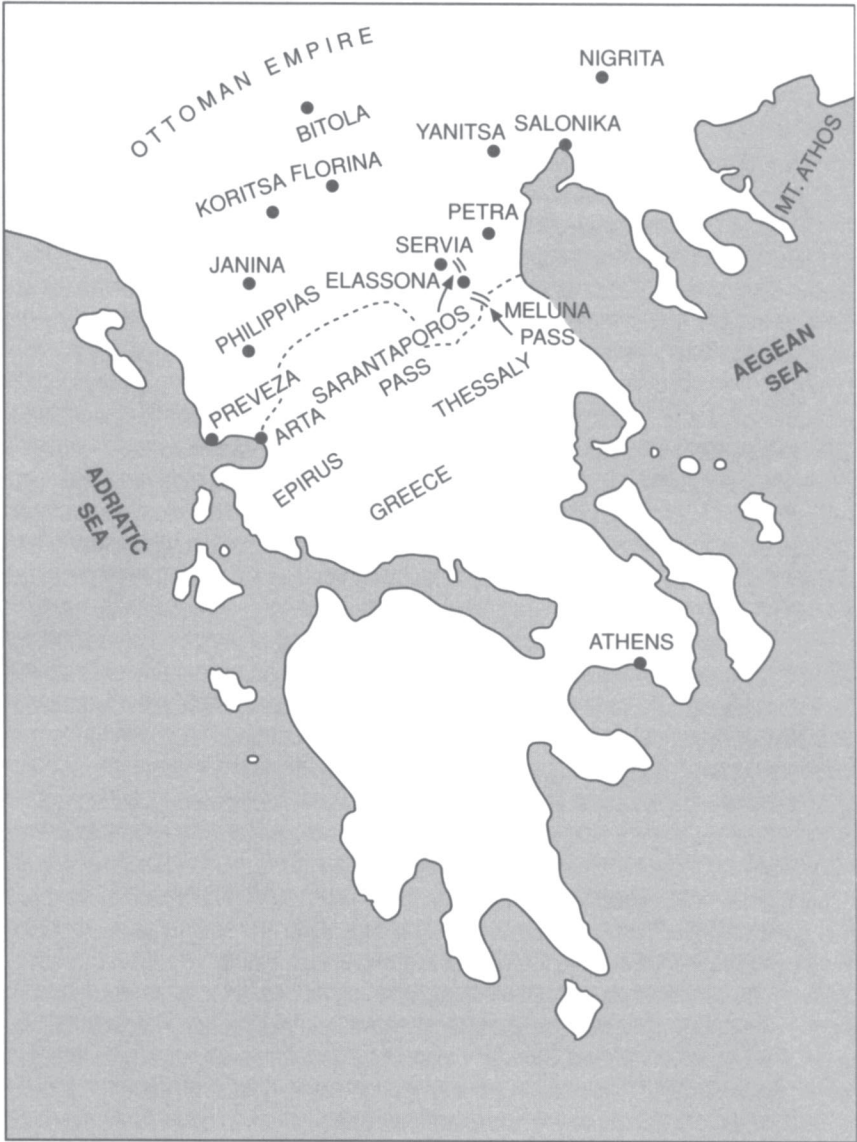
Map 1 The Balkans in 1912



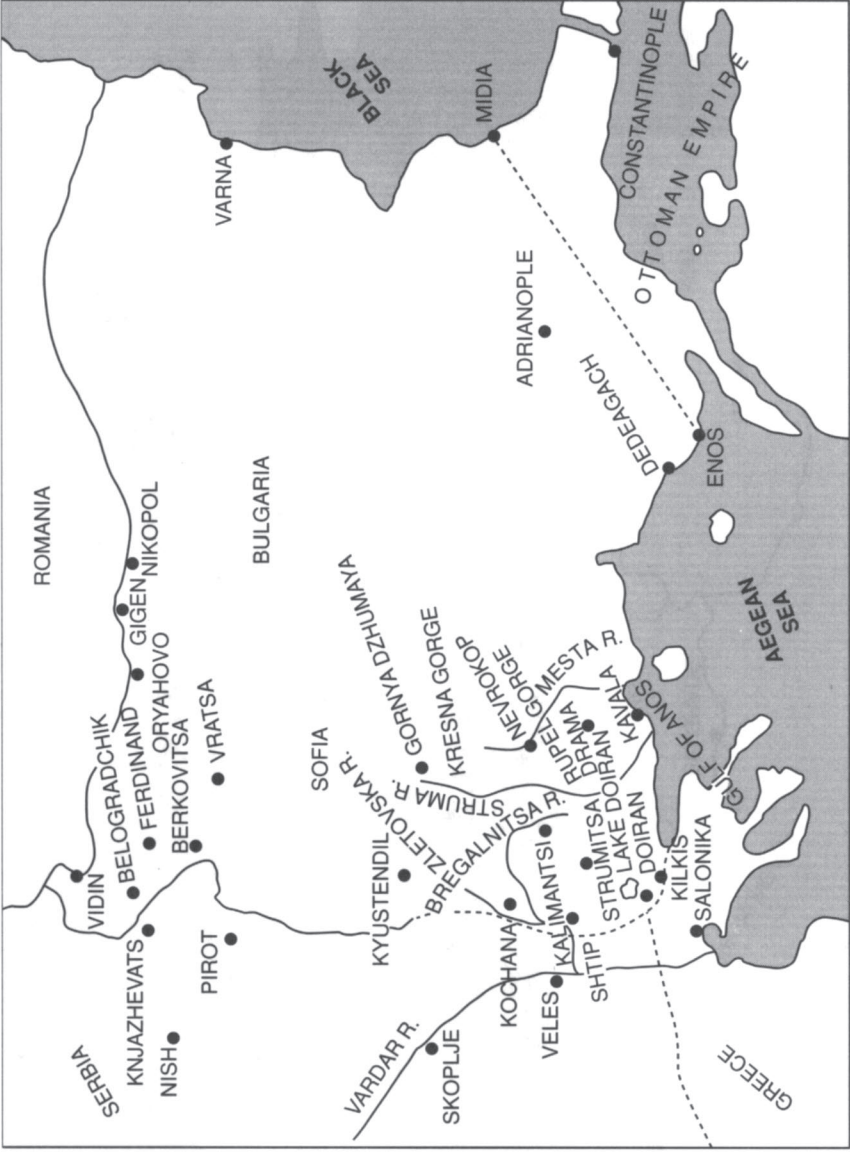
Map 2 Bulgaria in the First Balkan War



Map 3 Montenegro and Serbia in the First Balkan War



Map 4 Greece in the First Balkan War



Map 5 The Second Balkan War



Map 6 The Balkans after the peace settlement in 1913

BALKAN WAR ORIGINS

The Balkan Wars were a sharp and bloody series of conflicts fought in southeastern Europe during the autumn of 1912 and the winter, spring, and summer of 1913. In the First Balkan War, the Ottoman Empire fought a loose alliance of Balkan states, which included Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro, and Serbia. The First Balkan War began in October 1912. An armistice in December 1912 interrupted the fighting until January 1913. Fighting resumed around two besieged cities in Albania, one besieged city in Thrace, and in eastern Thrace until the spring of 1913. The participants in the First Balkan War signed a preliminary peace treaty in London on 30 May 1913.

In the Second Balkan War, Bulgaria fought a looser coalition of Greece, Montenegro, Serbia, Romania, and the Ottoman Empire. Fighting began on 29 June 1913. By the time it ended a little over a month later, the allies had overwhelmed Bulgaria. Peace treaties signed in Bucharest in August 1913 and Constantinople in September 1913 concluded the Second Balkan War. In less than one year the Balkans would again be at war.

Congress of Berlin

The concept of nationalism, appearing from France and the German countries, swept into the Balkan Peninsula early in the nineteenth century. The initial impact was largely cultural. Intellectuals made great efforts to standardize and celebrate the vernacular languages of the Balkans. In doing so, they frequently referred and connected to the medieval states that had existed in the Balkans before the Ottoman conquest.

Soon the emphasis of nationalism became political. A strong desire to achieve national unity motivated the Balkan states to confront their erstwhile Ottoman conquerors. Balkan leaders assumed that only after the attainment of national unity could their states develop and prosper. In this regard the Balkan peoples sought to emulate the political and economic success of western Europe, especially Germany, by adopting the western European concept of nationalism as the model for their own national development. The Balkan peoples perceived

nationalism as a justification for the creation of specific geopolitical entities. As Vasil Levski, a nineteenth-century Bulgarian revolutionary activist, explained, “We are a people and want to live in complete freedom in our lands, there where the Bulgarians live, in Bulgaria, Thrace and Macedonia.”¹ This concept of western European nationalism displaced the old Ottoman millet system in the Balkans, which had permitted each major religious group a significant amount of self-administration. The millet system allowed Moslems, Orthodox, Catholics, and Jews to all live in proximity to each other without intruding upon each other. It gave the Balkan peoples a limited degree of cultural autonomy.

The Serbs in 1803 and the Greeks in 1821 revolted against their Ottoman overlords, partially in response to the dimly understood western European ethos of nationalism. By 1830 an independent Greek state emerged, and at the same time an autonomous Serbian state came into existence. The Ottomans had conceded Montenegrin autonomy since the eighteenth century. This, however, was more in response to the bellicosity and the remoteness of the Black Mountain than to any overt nationalist stirring.

The successes of the Italians in 1861 and Germans in 1871 in attaining national unity further inspired the Balkan peoples. The military aspects of the Italian and German unifications served as examples to follow. Each Balkan people envisioned the restoration of the medieval empires on which they based their national ideas. The Bulgarians sought the boundaries of the First or Second Bulgarian Empires, the Greeks the revival of the Byzantine Empire, and the Montenegrins and Serbs sought to recover the extent of the empire of Stephan Dushan. In 1876 Serbia and Montenegro went to war against the Ottoman Empire to establish large national states in the western Balkan Peninsula. That same year an anti-Ottoman revolt broke out in Bulgaria. In 1877 Russia intervened in the Balkans on the side of the Bulgarian nationalists. After nine months of unexpectedly hard fighting, the Russians prevailed. The Treaty of San Stefano in March 1878, ending the Russo-Turkish War, created a large independent Bulgarian state and enlarged Serbia and Montenegro. The Treaty of San Stefano fulfilled the maximum territorial aspirations of the Bulgarian nationalists. The new Bulgaria included most of the territory in the eastern Balkan Peninsula between the Danube River and the Aegean Sea. It also included Macedonia. For the first and only time in modern history, a Balkan people had attained all of their national goals.

The Treaty of San Stefano met a negative response from the leading countries of Europe, who had for the past 200 years assumed the prerogative of arbitrating international affairs. These countries as they existed in 1878, Germany, Great Britain, France, Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Italy, were known collectively as the Great Powers. A desire to limit the ambitions of the Russian Empire in the Balkans and to impose order on the chaotic conditions in Ottoman Europe, especially on the part of Austria-Hungary and Great Britain, led the Great Powers to accept the offer of Otto von Bismarck to host a conference to resolve the Balkan issues. Bismarck promised to serve as an

“honest broker, who really wants to do business.”² Bismarck invited representatives of the Great Powers to meet in the German capital. The subsequent Congress of Berlin was attended by the leading diplomats of the time, including Lord Salisbury of Great Britain and Count Andrássy of Austria-Hungary. It greatly diminished the size and independence of the new Bulgarian state. In place of a large independent Bulgaria, the Congress of Berlin established an autonomous Bulgarian principality under Ottoman suzerainty, a semi-autonomous Eastern Rumelia under the authority of the Ottoman sultan, and returned Macedonia to the direct rule of the Sultan. This settlement was a catastrophe for Bulgarian nationalism. Ivan E. Geshov, who would lead Bulgaria into the First Balkan War in 1912, wrote,

When we in Plovdiv read in the *Times* in the ominous month of July 1878 the first published text of the agreement, in which a short sighted diplomacy in Berlin partitioned our homeland, we were left crushed and thunderstruck. Was such an injustice possible? Could such an injustice be reversed?³

The Congress of Berlin also recognized the full independence of a slightly smaller Serbia and deprived Montenegro of San Stefano-sanctioned gains in Hercegovina, the Sandjak of Novi Pazar and northern Albania. Austria-Hungary advanced into the western Balkans by the occupation of Bosnia-Hercegovina and the Sandjak of Novi Pazar. These territories remained *de jure* parts of the Ottoman Empire. They also remained objectives of Montenegrin and Serbian national aspirations. Persistent Greek claims led to something of a corollary to the Berlin settlement. In 1881, the Great Powers sanctioned the Greek annexation of Thessaly and part of southern Epirus.

The Bulgarians soon recovered from the shock of their losses. Geshov wrote to a friend, “Bulgaria is not only truncated but stabbed in the heart. The operation, or better to say this series of operations, inflicted upon Bulgaria, cause us terrible pains and will cripple us for a long time, but will not prove fatal to us.”⁴ Lord Salisbury, the British advocate of a contained Russia and small Bulgaria, indicated that a big Bulgaria was a matter of time.⁵ The Bulgarians were not alone in their frustrations over the Berlin settlement. The Greeks, Montenegrins, and the Serbs likewise perceived in the Treaty of Berlin a barrier to their national aspirations. After 1878 all the Balkan states strove to overcome the Berlin settlement and realize national unity.

Balkan national aspirations

The Bulgarians were the first to act against the Berlin settlement. In 1885, they unilaterally proclaimed the unification of Bulgaria with Eastern Rumelia. The Great Powers did not act directly to preserve the Berlin settlement. Serbia,