

**WORTH A POMERANIAN GRENADIER'S BONES:
THE BALKANS FROM 1877 TO 1914**

A.Bahadır KAYNAK

*Istanbul Kemerburgaz University, Istanbul, Turkey
e-mail: bahadir.kaynak@kemerburgaz.edu.tr*

Abstract

Bismarck emphasized the insignificance of the Balkans for Germany's interests in his famous quote "it is not worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier". But it could also be interpreted as his way of avoiding the hardest dilemmas of Germany's geopolitical equation after Prussia defeated the French in 1870. His two allies against French revanchism, Austria and Russia had conflicting interests in the Balkans as Ottoman power was falling apart. They were watching over suspiciously each other while spoils of Turkey in Europe were up for grabs. This redesigning process of the region would continue for 35 years without triggering a major conflict. However the general European balance that absorbed the shocks emanating from the region collapsed in July 1914 giving way to global scale warfare. In this paper, we will try to see why a region, seemingly of secondary importance to most of the global players, triggered a war that required so much sacrifice. Why did the major powers, which were adept at containing local conflicts before, let the events slip out of control in 1914? Was it the increasing significance of the region for them that they were less willing to compromise each time, or was it the disastrous result of failure of diplomacy?

Keywords: *The Balkans, Bismarck, 1877-1878 Russo-Turkish War, Balkan Wars, 1st World War*

Introduction

Bismarck's famous quotation "the Entire Orient is not worth the bones of a single Pomeranian soldier" is usually believed to refer specifically to the Balkans rather than the whole Ottoman Empire (McMeekin, 2010: 8). This remark was generally accepted as a sign of his indifference to the fate of Turkey or Bismarck's distaste of the Eastern Problem. In fact, he was not unaware of Turkey's strategic importance and realized that although it did not mean a lot for Germany directly, it was of great significance for other major powers (McMeekin, 2011: 80). Nevertheless, less than half a century later, the strains in the region would create a political vortex that would draw in Germany as well.

As the Balkans entered the last quarter of 19th century, Ottoman political domination in the region had become very fragile. Serbs were planning a military move to drive Turks out of their homeland while Greek and Bulgarian nationalists were restless. More importantly the arch enemy Russians were recovering from the humiliation they suffered at the hands of the French and British during the Crimean War. The military engagement in Crimea was already a response of these major powers to the expansionistic drives of Russia in the Balkans. In 1856 Britain and France aimed to make the conditions imposed on Russia in the Balkans and Black Sea everlasting but the turn of events was to show that the effort was a futile one (Taylor, 1974: 217). International conditions were changing at a rapid pace and neither Britain nor France had the strength and the resolve to pursue their anti-Russian policies.

European balance of power underwent a major shift after France's decisive defeat against Prussia in 1870 and the change in power distribution among major players was bound to have an effect on the peripheral zones. The French not only lost Alsace-Lorraine and were obliged to pay an indemnity but also had to deal with a unified and powerful Germany and hence were in no mood to antagonize the Russians. Apparently, Bismarck's primary concern would be maintaining the newly established *status quo* (Stavrianos, 2000: 394) against the French. As a result, Three Emperors League of 1873 united Russia, Austria and Prussia in alliance against republican and revolutionary ideas but the main issue, at least for Bismarck, was French revanchism. For this treaty to hold, allied powers should be able to contain the differences among themselves, the most serious being the power struggle between Russia and Austria in the Balkans.

However the situation in the region was in a delicate balance while the restless local nationalist movements were agitating and they also could find powerful allies. Czar Alexander and Russian Foreign Minister Prince Alexander Gorchakov were careful enough not to stir the Balkans in order not to provoke Austria but an effective group of nationalists including the Ambassador to Istanbul Ignatiev favored Pan-Slavist ideas (Glenny, 2000: 129). This romantic political movement was aimed at creating bonds of brotherhood among Slavs that were members of Orthodox Church. National aspirations of Balkan nations were naturally a means rather than an end for Ignatiev and his followers for their main task was to reverse the clauses of Paris Treaty of 1856 that excluded Russia from the Balkans and Black Sea region.

Austria also adopted a more aggressive strategy in the southeastern Europe after being expelled from Italian Peninsula. They had to accept loss of Lombardy in 1859 after France intervened on the side of Sardinian King who would be crowned as the King of Italy. In 1866 after their defeat in the hands of Prussians, Austria withdrew from the entire Italian peninsula so southeastern Europe would become their sole area of expansion and the most convenient location for political and economic domination. In that sense Austrian reverses in Italy would create important repercussions for Balkan Peninsula (Yasamee, 2011: 64).

In the meantime, victorious Germans not only managed to divert European powers' aggressive energies to peripheral zones but also welcomed it. Bismarck was happy to have France distracted in African affairs, he similarly could have his southern and eastern neighbors deadlocked in the southeastern Europe on the condition that it did not turn into an armed conflict.

1877-1878 War and Berlin Congress

The crisis starting in the Balkans starting in 1875 became a source of concern for Bismarck for it had the potential to bring down the Three Emperors League (Young, 2006: 45). The possibility of triggering a general European War made the region a hotspot to be dealt with urgently; hence he would urge Russia to proceed only with Austria's approval. Russia could only make some gains provided that Austria was also compensated in order to maintain balance of power¹²⁰ (Morgenthau, 1965: 179), as both countries in the Balkans were in constant vigilance against each other. By preserving peace in the Balkans, Germany could sustain the fragile balance in Europe established after the victory against France in 1870. But Russia should also not be alienated, so that they would not have an incentive to make an anti-German alliance with France. In order to do so, Austria should also be kept close but her expansionary drives in southeastern Europe had to be checked.

Although seemingly oblivious to the fate of Turkish Empire, Bismarck did not have a preference for the dismemberment of Turkey in Europe nor did he share the fashionable anti-Turkish sentiments of the day. Actually he was telling Kaiser Wilhelm I that those who abused the terms Europe or Christendom to justify their territorial ambitions were not to be trusted (McMeekin, 2011: 82).

In 1875, the uprising in Bosnia Herzegovina, drew the attention of Austria and Russia and eventually turned into a full-scale crisis. Brutal suppression of dissenters coupled with Turkey's default on debt payments was alienating even traditional supporters like France and Britain. Having struck a deal with Austria, as Bismarck had required, Russia now had a free hand against Turkey and in April 1877 Russo-Turkish the war started. Serbia and Montenegro were already fighting since 1876.

Russian forces started moving south, deep into Turkey's European provinces in the summer of 1877 and it seemed that it would not take long before they reached Istanbul. Unexpectedly they were to be stopped by the dogged defense of Gazi Osman Paşa and his soldiers, an event that probably saved Turkey's presence in Europe even today (Taylor, 1974: 245). Ottoman Army managed to hold the ground until the next year and by that time British were ready to intervene. Even the image of the Turks in British media was changing from the oppressor of helpless people to heroic fighters against a powerful aggressor.

¹²⁰Morgenthau defines compensation as one of the major mechanisms to maintain balance of power. In order to maintain the balance, opposing parties should not make one-sided gains at the expense of others. Each party should be compensated with a balancing gain.

Once the Russian troops advanced to San Stefano after bloody battles and British fleet stood menacingly at the entrance of the Straits, Bismarck would take the stage in Berlin Congress in order to find a peaceful settlement. Even though he seemed indifferent to the fate of Ottoman Empire at best, the role he undertook at the Congress could be considered pro-Ottoman. Porte's ability to survive Russian aggression impressed him but more importantly it would be impossible to arrange a complete dissolution of Turkey in Europe without triggering a major war. In Berlin, the harsh terms of San Stefano Treaty imposed upon Turkey by the Russians would be amended if not annulled by the participation of Great Powers. According to the conditions of Berlin Congress, an autonomous and tributary Bulgaria was created but at a reduced size. Rumelia and Macedonia would be restored to Turkey but Bosnia Herzegovina would be occupied and administered by Austria while Serbia, Montenegro and Romania would now be independent countries. As a matter of fact, Hungarians were opposed to inclusion of more Slavs into the Empire for they feared that they might lose control of the country (Glenny, 2000: 139). But British were happy to offer Bosnia to Austria-Hungary so that they could balance Russia in the Balkans. After 1878, Britain now relied more on Austria-Hungary rather than Turkey in creating a counter-balance to Russia. When Austria extended its sphere of influence to Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sanjak as well as bigger trophies like Serbia and Montenegro, British were happy to oblige provided that Habsburg Monarchy continue to be friendly to their interests (Kovic, 2011: 316). The Russians were obviously unhappy with the results of the Congress but Bismarck was able to appease them to some extent by reviving the Three Emperors League in 1881.

From the beginning of the crisis, Britain's position was insisting on checking Russian advances in the region because they wanted to assure that the Straits continue to be controlled by the Turks. For Prime Minister Disraeli, whose name would be associated with jingoism, would continue to assert that his defense of Turkey was serving to protect the interests of British Empire (Ibid., p.313). He believed that disintegration of Turkey would create a void that was going to be filled with Russia and the balance of power in the region would badly tilt in favor of the Czar. He even speculated that if eventually the Ottoman Empire would collapse, Britain should occupy Istanbul to establish a base for the Navy before the Russians.

The Berlin Congress served to find a common ground between the major powers rather than settling the issues between fighting countries. Austria-Hungary was not an active participant in the War but she was most to gain from the settlement. Turkey was clearly losing a great deal and her presence in southeastern Europe was substantially reduced but Russia did not win either even though she emerged victorious from the War. Similarly Romania and Serbia did not reach their maximalist targets despite the fact that they actively fought in the War.

As a result, Russia left the Congress with major grievances and Bismarck committed Germany more deeply into Eastern Question (Thomson, 1990: 466), because Austria was now exposed to irredentism of Russia as well as nationalist movements. Bismarck, as we have already commented, did not find anything

directly involving Germany but was determined to preserve the balance of Three Emperors League. Therefore when the British Navy appeared before the Dardanelles he would be the one to call the Congress. His *Realpolitik* approach to foreign affairs is well known, meaning he was interested in power, balances and compensations rather than Balkan people's expectations. It was a natural consequence for him to offer Bessarabia to Russians in return for a smaller Bulgaria (Glenny, 2000: 149) than agreed at San Stefano, a small consolation for the Czar.

The result of the agreement not only failed to satisfy all of the major powers but also regional balance of power looked very fragile. Turkish and Bulgarian authorities were in disagreement about drawing of the common border, refugee problem, status of Eastern Rumelia but also there was the headache of Bulgarian nationalists continuing agitation in Macedonia (Tokay, 2011: 256-258). Furthermore, the multicultural multiethnic structure of the Empire had fallen apart to be replaced by exclusionary nationalisms of each ethnic group. It meant that Pan-Slavist and Pan-Orthodox political currents would also fail (Karpat: 2004: 226) as Russians would also soon find out.

Before the Explosion: Troubles Pile Up 1878-1912

Ottoman Empire was still holding on to Macedonia, Albania, most of Epirus and Thrace though the temporary situation was only a reflection of the balance of power between major players. Within a few years irredentist powers would start to carve into the European territories of Ottoman Empire. The new King of Bulgaria, Alexander, being German by birth and hostile to Russia, earned West's sympathies that would be helpful in 1885 when Eastern Rumelia sought to unite with Bulgaria. In fact, because of Britain's opposition during the Berlin Congress, Eastern Rumelia –that was claimed by the Bulgarians- was left under Ottoman rule and Russians had to swallow the bitter pill. But under Alexander's rule, Bulgaria would find her allies in the West while Russia withdrew its support for the Bulgarian claims (Jelavich, 1991: 213). British support deterred Turkey from taking any action against Eastern Rumelia's annexation by Bulgaria; Sultan Abdülhamid II could not dare to undertake any military action without the backing of any major power.

In the meantime, competition for domination of the region was intensifying and tensions were high among the young nations of the Balkans, namely Serbia and Bulgaria. A greater Bulgaria would be a heavy weight power in the regional power play to become the primary concern for regional rivals. Serbia, fearing the possibility of losing the struggle for Macedonia, decided to strike first. Serbian King Milan may also have also planned a larger military conflict to draw in major powers. According to his calculations, after having smashed the Bulgarian forces, he could draw in Russia to the war which would naturally compel his Benefactor Austria to reach out to Serbia's help (Glenny, 2000: 176). However Serbia was squarely beaten by Bulgaria after a military engagement and Austria's threat of going to war against Bulgaria could barely help Serbia avoid territorial losses as a consequence of their defeat.

On the southern cone of the Peninsula, Greek ambitions were also not satisfied with the settlement in Berlin because large portions of Thessaly and Epirus were not granted to them (Thomson, 1990: 470). Thessaly was acquired via negotiations with Turkey but the revolt in Crete and Greek support for the rebels would trigger a war against Turkey in 1897. Greece suffered serious defeats but international mediation undid the damage so Berlin settlement survived this military confrontation as well.

Macedonia in terms of its economic value and its strategic location increased the appetites of contenders for power in the region. A complex ethnic composition could be used to justify Serbian, Bulgarian, Greek and Albanian claims in the region at the same time. Soon afterwards, guerilla warfare erupted in the region against Turkish rule and IMRO was among the best known of these fighting forces. They claimed to fight for an independent Macedonia but had close ties to Bulgarian population even though they were not directly linked to the government.

The Ilinden Uprising incited by IMRO guerillas in 1903 caught not only Ottoman authorities but also the Bulgarians who might consider coming to their rescue, off-guard (Hupchick, 2004: 302). After three months of fighting, the government authorities finally managed to suppress rebellion but the ferocity of military measures and the illustrated weakness of the Empire would bring in foreign intervention.

Political pressure on Ottoman rule would take a concrete form after the rebellion when Austria-Hungary and Russia agreed on Mürszteg reform program in 1903 and imposed it on the Empire; however the Sultan delayed its application. The authorities had no doubt that the program favored Christians at the expense of Muslims but did not have the strength to oppose those big powers. Bulgarians who were asking for an autonomous Macedonia that would be ruled by a Christian ruler were not satisfied but the Albanians would be the most disappointed group after the implementation of reforms (Tokay, 2011: 262).

Albanians, too, were starting to become another source of restlessness in the region. They were 70% Muslims and were considered to be among the most loyal subjects of the Sultan. For a while, it seemed that Albanians could be satisfied with autonomy and decreased taxation but as Christian communities gained independence one by one, establishing a nation state comprised of Janina, Kosovo, Bitola and Shkoder provinces appeared more and more attractive (Jelavich, 1984: 84). While Serbs, Bulgarians, Montenegrins and Greeks fought for fulfilling their maximalist dreams, Albanians could not wait idly to see their homeland taken away.

In fact, after Sultan Abdülhamid II was finally deposed by the Young Turk movement, declaration of Constitution in 1908 was hoped to bring about a peaceful coexistence of nations in the Balkans. Unfortunately, these expectations would not materialize and it was soon understood that İttihatveTerakki was rather bent on a policy of centralization in opposition to the Constitution (Hupchick, 2004: 312). It would not take long before centrifugal national forces in the Empire's domain find

their own way. Albanians would be among those frustrated subjects of the Empire to rise for their independence after 1909.

While the region was boiling with political agitation, both Austria and Russia were planning for an eventual termination of Ottoman rule. In 1908 Austria annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina that they effectively administered since the Berlin Congress. Serbia's relations with Austria had already deteriorated sharply since the accession of pro-Russian Karadjorgevic, so Austria did not hesitate to step in to a territory that the Serbians thought was a part of their homeland. This was going to unwind the series of events (Fischer, 2007: 56) leading to 1914.

On the larger picture European balance of power was also witnessing major shifts. Within few years after departure of Bismarck from the office, France and Russia would sign a military agreement to be converted into a full scale alliance shortly after. This Dual Alliance was confronting the Triple Alliance at the center of Europe established between Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy. Britain was staying aloof, in line with her holder of the balance role, though eventually in 1904 they signed the Entente Cordiale with France to counter the increasing dominance of Germany in Europe. They were already getting nervous about Germany's naval build-up strategy. With the signing of a British-Russian Treaty in 1907, old differences were settled between those two powers and division of Europe into two hostile camps was finally completed.

The Balkan Wars 1912-1913

Until the second decade of twentieth century, it was mostly the delicate balance between Austria and Russia in the Balkans rather than Ottoman military might that kept the Balkans stable. Russia was busy with her own troubles in the Far East and Austria did not want any disruption of its trading system in southeastern Europe, so nationalist agitation in the region could not find external support. But annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina by Austria caused Russia to unleash the irredentist fervor of her Slavic brothers in the Balkans. Besides, their dreams of an Empire in the Far East were blocked as a result of the stunning defeat they suffered at the hands of Japanese in 1905. Despite mutual jealousies and conflicting interests, Balkan nations would be able to hold together long enough to form a War alliance while Turkey was distracted by Italian invasion of its Libya province.

First Balkan War which took place between Turkey and the alliance of Balkan states Montenegro, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece resulted in the complete defeat of the former. Ottoman forces were broken everywhere but worst of all Bulgarian Army threatened to occupy the capital city, Istanbul and they could hardly be stopped before capturing her. Nevertheless the uneasy coalition bringing the Balkan nations together could not withstand the jealousies arising from Bulgaria's capturing the lion's share hence the Second Balkan War was fought to prevent the domination of the region by Bulgaria. Treaties of Bucharest and Istanbul concluded

the War as England and France used their leverage to reach an agreement for their primary concern was to avoid drawing in major powers in the conflict, provided that Istanbul and Straits were still controlled by Turkey (Kutlu, 2007: 207). However, the peace treaties could only provide a very brief respite but did not terminate the warlike atmosphere in the region as all parties looked on to each other with suspicion. Worse still, tensions between Austria and Russia were rising as changes in regional balance of power directly affected their status vis-à-vis the other. Britain and Germany were not also very reconciliatory so it was a close call before the War could be averted. It was a warning signal to all parties showing the possibility of contagion of War from the region but the events would show that the lessons would not be drawn properly from the incident.

Road to World War I: 1914

After losing influence in their major client state in the Balkans, Bulgaria, Russians quickly found another opportunity to compensate for their losses when Peter Karadjordjevic captured the Serbian throne by a military coup in 1903. He was not only supported by the Army but was also a defender of romantic nationalistic ideas that sought to establish a greater Serbia comprised of Habsburg controlled territories, Croatia, Slovenia and Bosnia. As a result the relations between Austria and Serbia deteriorated sharply after that date (Jelavich, 1991: 240). The annexation of Bosnia by Austria in 1908 in that sense struck at the heart of Serbian nationalism.

A secret society organized under the name *Narodna Obrana* was meant to resist Bosnia's occupation by Austria. Although Serbia had to abandon much of their activities under pressure, many of their members joined Black Hand working for the same purpose. The reputation of the organization grew after Balkan Wars (Ibid., p.255) while the nationalistic fervor of Serbians were reinvigorated rather than satiated after doubling of their territory according to the terms of the settlement. Austrian Archduke Francis Ferdinand's assassination in Sarajevo was the doing of this nationalist clique according to Austria's view.

Habsburg Monarchy correctly saw the problem with nationalities as their main concern and desired to solve it or at worst sustain it on "a balanced state of mutual dissatisfaction" (Joll & Martel: 12). Serbia's maximalist dreams constituted an existential threat to Austria's territorial integrity. Archduke's assassination provided a perfect opportunity to settle the problems at once and Austrians escalated the tension in order to humiliate Serbia to a maximum extent. Although the Serbians were quite conciliatory in the face of Austrian ultimatum, Habsburg Monarchy would decisively take steps leading to war.

At the outset, there were signs that the Germans thought that the conflict could be a localized affair between Austria and Serbia (Turner, 1970: 84) but the possibility of Serbia being crushed by Austria would significantly improve her position at the expense of Russia, not to mention the psychological blow it would bring onto Slav

solidarity. The Russians toyed with the idea of a partial mobilization to exclude districts on German border but technically it would not work. Austria's full mobilization would invoke Austro-German Alliance (Ibid., p.92) and require a general mobilization of Germany. That would automatically force French mobilization and a Franco-German War. The German war plans envisaged striking at France through Belgium which meant Britain's involvement. A relatively minor conflict triggered an unstoppable chain reaction and all the hell broke loose.

Conclusion

Morgenthau defines the balance of power as a system comprised of several sub-systems that are interrelated to each other (Morgenthau, 1965: 198). There is a hierarchy among those systems such that the dominant imposes its conditions on dependent ones thanks to its greater weight. To state it differently sub-systems are conditioned by dominant system.

Interestingly, Morgenthau refers to the balance of power in the Balkan sub-system as a source of concern for great powers (Ibid., p.199) throughout the nineteenth century. They had become more or less involved with the issues of the region and the general European balance of power conditioned the struggle among the regional powers. Until the First World War, European balance of power was stable enough to absorb the shocks coming from the Balkans. Although there were major changes in power distribution among regional powers while Ottoman Empire retreated, great powers managed to reach a settlement each time and enforce their solution to the local players. Berlin Congress is a perfect example of this claim as England, Germany, France and Austria agreed on a common plan and imposed it on the regional powers as well as the isolated big player Russia. Despite emerging victorious from the War, the general balance of power did not let Russia reap the benefits of their successful military campaign.

Likewise, Balkan Wars were terminated without drawing in European powers into the conflict but European balance of power was becoming more and more unstable. Diplomacy managed to contain major wars in the region but in 1914, assassination of Francis Ferdinand in Sarajevo created a spark that was going to flame the whole World. This seems enigmatic because nearly for forty years major powers had not let events get out of control. So, the question becomes what had changed to convince big European countries to go to a bloody war because of a region that was allegedly "not worth the bones of a Pomeranian grenadier"?

Our explanation is that neither the initial contempt for Balkan affairs was real nor did the region become a primary concern for Great Powers later on. The Balkans was never an insignificant part of the World for major powers in the 19th century. But in terms of prioritization Bismarck was more concerned with general European balance as were England and France. His powerful wording reflected emphasis on the delicate situation in Europe, just as he once put a map of central Europe and said

“This is my map of Africa” (Warwo, 2010: 133) indicating how colonial struggles were of secondary importance to him.

Until the outbreak of World War I, the success in maintaining the stability of the dominant system helped absorb the instabilities in the dependent systems, in our case the Balkans. However, a new redistribution of power, that is the ascendancy of Germany in Europe, was bringing an end to the stability of the system. In practical terms, Germany’s war strategy based on the Schlieffen Plan that was designed to take on France and Russia at the same time¹²¹, ensured that a conflict in Eastern Europe would automatically involve the West as well. The setting of the balance of power among major players had become such that once one of them started to mobilize, it was becoming more rational to take the last step rather than try to hold the mobilization; hence a doomsday machine was created (Kissinger, 1994: 202). Technically it was almost impossible to stop the mobilizations in coordination under those circumstances. Besides, neither Russia nor France was willing to take on Germany alone so they had a stake in generalizing a local conflict. But even that might not be sufficient to stop the Central Powers. So, the imbalance in power distribution would draw in holder of the balance¹²² (Morgenthau, 1965: 194) England into the equation.

In terms of its significance for World politics not much had changed in the Balkans from 1878 to 1914 but as the dominant system turned from a stable to an unstable equilibrium, the sparks coming out of the region would inevitably ignite the powder keg at the center of Europe. The instability in the system explains the feeling of many of the protagonists of time that they were being taken away by the course of the events (Joll & Martel, 2007: 202). The complex military and political arrangements had created such a mechanism that once it started to unwind it was becoming harder to stop before the conflict was carried on to the extremes. The price would be the bones of millions of soldiers and civilians.

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121 Created by Count Von Schlieffen, the plan is a response of German military planners of 19th century to the possibility of a two front war against France and Russia. Russia’s long mobilization duration and geographical depth convinced the Germans to deliver a quick and decisive blow to France first and deal with Russia afterwards.

122. In order for balance of power to hold, a neutral power strong enough to maintain the stability of the system should throw its weight to the weaker side. In 1914 Britain would support Franco-Russian alliance against Germany-Austria.

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