



Conflicts in the Balkans before the First World War

This is a transcript of the [Conflicts in the Balkans before the First World War](https://www.mrallsophistory.com/podcast/conflicts-in-the-balkans-before-the-first-world-war) podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

To understand the importance of the Balkans, we need to remember that the region was at the heart of a major power struggle between Austria-Hungary, Russia and Turkey. Much of the area was under the control of the Ottoman Empire, but by the end of the 19th Century, Turkey had become known as “the sick man of Europe” due to its declining power. If the Ottoman Empire collapsed, it threatened to upset the balance of power throughout the entire Balkan region. The ‘Eastern Question’, as it became known, forced the European powers to consider what might happen if the Ottoman Empire fell apart. Austria-Hungary and Russia would clearly try to benefit from the situation – but how would that affect the rest of Europe?

Although Balkan nationalism had been growing throughout the 19th Century, it was the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-8 that provided catalyst for the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. In the war Russia and its allies crushed Turkey. Serbia, Romania and Montenegro won their independence from Turkey, and Russia re-created the state of Bulgaria. The strength of Russia, and the ease with which it imposed its will in the Balkans, alarmed the other European powers. Combined with concerns over the vacuum of power left by Turkey’s defeat, the nations of Europe sought to calm the situation and limit the influence of the growing nationalist movements within the Balkans. In an attempt to maintain the balance of power in the region, the Congress of Berlin in 1878 placed the former Ottoman territories of Bosnia and Herzegovina under Austrian occupation, which humiliated the Russians who believed that as the victors in the war they should have the right to determine the shape of the region. Russia supported a program of Pan-Slavism (the desire for unity of all Slavic peoples) in the region, and acted as a protector of the so-called South Slavs. The Balkans were also strategically important for Russia – the Black Sea ports relied on being able to access the Mediterranean through the straits of Constantinople – and so Russia had good reason to want to have influence in the area. Meanwhile, Austria-Hungary viewed Pan-Slavism and Russia’s growing influence in the Balkans with alarm. It was partly this tension between Russia and Austria-Hungary that led Bismarck to work on his series of alliances throughout the 1880s that I discuss in my podcast on Europe from 1871-1890.

The problem for Central Europe was that the collapse of Turkey showed that multinational empires were not invincible. The Habsburg monarchy in Austria had already faced its own challenges. The Ausgleich of 1867 forced them to re-establish the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Hungary, separate from and no longer subject to the Austrian Empire. Concerns over the empire’s long-term survival had already been addressed by the government in Vienna. Several plans were discussed regarding reform of the Empire, and especially about the possibility of creating an autonomous South Slav state within the Empire, similar to the



position of Hungary, and with the aim of appeasing the nationalists. Without a clear commitment to these plans, however, South Slav terrorist groups began targeting Austria. Vienna suspected Serbia, in particular, of supporting these anti-Habsburg terrorist organizations. Many within the Austrian government and military believed that a showdown with Serbia over its support for terrorism was inevitable. For some it was even desirable.

It was against this historical background that the Balkans reemerged as a focal point during the Bosnian Crisis of 1908-9. Austria-Hungary and Russia had already secretly agreed that they would support each other's Balkan territorial claims at an upcoming international conference. However, Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina without waiting for the conference, thereby offending Russia. The crisis snowballed. Bulgaria declared its independence from Turkey. Serbia and Montenegro, which both sought a united south Slav state that would include Bosnia-Herzegovina, mobilized their forces against Austria. Russia, which had long-endorsed a Pan-Slav movement in the region, threw its support behind Serbia. Unlike 1878 where Bismarck was in a position to act as a mediator between Austria-Hungary and Russia, Germany – as a result of the Alliance System that had emerged in the intervening years – was now firmly on the side of Austria-Hungary. Indeed, in January 1909 Germany declared that it would stand 'shoulder to shoulder' with its ally, and issued an ultimatum to Russia that it would mobilise its army to support them if necessary. Russia backed down, having only recently suffered a humiliating defeat by Japan in 1905. The Tsar was not prepared to risk taking on Austria and Germany and Bosnia-Herzegovina was absorbed into the Austro-Hungarian Empire. However, the crisis did prompt Russia to embark on a new round of military reforms in a determined attempt to never allow its prestige to be undermined again – especially in the Balkans. Serbs were enraged by the Austrian takeover, and it led to increased nationalist sentiment. The Austrian minister in Belgrade even warned his government in Vienna that Serbia was determined to exact revenge with the help of Russia.

An opportunity for Russia to restore its reputation emerged during the Balkan Wars of 1912-13. Serbia, Greece, Albania and Bulgaria fought and defeated the Ottomans in the First Balkan War in October 1912. The alliance, however, then turned on itself as Bulgaria was attacked by its partners after it tried to seize territory in Macedonia. Throughout these conflicts, Russia played a prominent role. The Tsar continued his support for the cause of the Slavic peoples against the Turks and, by implication, against the Austrians who – we should remember – were now in control of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Indeed, Serbia had entered the Balkan Wars with the clear aim of annexing Albania, which Austria sought to prevent. Russia reluctantly backed Serbia, and Germany again supported Austria and issued an ultimatum to Russia although privately urged Austrian restraint. Still lacking a military capable of taking on both Germany and Austria, Russia found itself humiliated again.



The Balkan Wars demonstrated firstly that Russia was not prepared for war. Secondly, they showed that Russia could not control its client states, especially Serbia. The tense international situation made this a particularly ominous development. However, the Balkan Wars also raised serious questions about Austria's future. Germany was particularly concerned that the nationalist movements within the Balkans would become bigger and bigger threats to the stability of the Austrian Empire. In particular, Germany worried that Balkan nationalists might soon become so strong that its only real ally—the Habsburg monarchy—might disintegrate like the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, would Germany be able to control Austria if it got itself into another crisis?

The answers to these questions emerge during the period known as the July Crisis in 1914. In the next podcast we'll explore how the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand acted as the spark that led to the First World War. Ensure that you have fully revised the long-term situation in Europe before moving on. Militarism, the alliance system, imperialism, nationalism, and rising tensions in the Balkans all contributed to the eventual outbreak of war, and so it is important that you have a secure understanding of these in order to explain the process by which the assassination led to the Great War.