THE BALKANS WHICH MADE FOR A WORLD WAR

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The centenary of World War One has arrived and despite pressure from the EU, tensions in the Balkans are still visible. This article will investigate the conditions of 100 years ago with the assumption that WWI was a war over the distribution of the lands of the Ottoman Empire and that the Balkan Wars have triggered the Great War. Anatolia had always been significant for Christian states being the land of mythological gods and the route of St. Paul’s missionary journeys. Imperialist states wanted to take over the geographic position and fertile lands of Turkey, especially the Straits.

This makes Turkey significant among the factors which caused the Balkan Wars and the WWI. Opposition to the Ottoman State lies at the root of alliances and enmities among European nations, Britain foremost and Russia.

The Racconigi Treaty signed between Russia and Italy on the 24th of October 1909 was intended to safeguard mutual interests over the Straits and Tripoli. The agreement laid the way for the Italian occupation of Tripoli, Derne, Tobruq and Benghazi on the 28th of September 1911 under the pretext of protecting the maltreated Italian population. Tripoli, which was the last remaining Ottoman territory in Africa was attractive due to its proximity to Italy. It could also open up Africa to Italian expansion. In the mid-nineteenth century Italy, like Germany, has become a strong state. However, being weaker than other imperialist states, it had to take territory away from weaker states.

Russian diplomat Count Alexander Petrovich Izvolski, who signed the Racconigi Treaty, played an important role in his country’s orientation towards the Balkans. The diplomat had secured a verbal agreement on the 15th of September 1908 in Moravia between Russia and Austria to allow Russian ships to be able to sail through the Turkish Straits. In return Russia would support Austria’s annexation of Bosnia, which took place on
the 7th of October 1908. Austria did not provide the support it had promised Russia once it had annexed Bosnia.

Austria’s annexation of Bosnia is the most important factor which upset European balances. This event triggered the Balkan Wars.

A geography which houses so many different nations as the Balkans had witnessed increased nationalism following the French Revolution of 1789. The Ottoman State could not fight in the Tripoli and Benghazi as it was already challenged by rebellions in the Balkans. Therefore it asked great powers to arbitrate faced with Italian invasion. However, once these states declared neutrality, the Ottomans were forced to fight the Italians. There were few Ottoman troops in Tripoli and it was ill prepared due to the uprisings in the Balkans. British neutrality in Egypt severed land connections. The Ottoman navy was inadequate and naval support could not be secured. Nevertheless some staff officers including Mustafa Kemal and Enver made it to Tripoli under difficult conditions. The Italian advance was successfully resisted with limited means and the Italians were challenged by the defence. The Ottoman government also imposed an economic embargo on Italy at the time. However, the Italians then turned towards the Mediterranean and invaded Rhodes and the Twelve Islands on the 17th of May 1912.

The men and equipment transferred from the Balkans to the Italian front weakened the Ottomans in the Balkans. Nationalism and separatism in the Balkans grew.

The Usi Treaty signed on the 18th of October 1912 ended the Ottoman-Italian War. The Italians evacuated Tripoli and Benghazi. Italy returned the Twelve Islands to the Ottomans but agreed to keep them until the end of the newly beginning Balkan War against a possible Greek invasion. Although the sultan would have a representative in Tripoli, the final piece of African land under Ottoman control was thus lost. As a result the Italians de facto settled in the Aegean, North Africa became the scene of Italian nationalism and the balance of power in the Eastern Mediterranean was disrupted.

Another important factor which contributed to the Balkan War was the courage given the rebels by the Tripoli War. It was also influenced by the growing recognition of the weakness of the Ottoman State and its inability to protect its lands. The Balkan War is separated into the First Balkan War and the second.
Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Montenegro began the First Balkan War against the Ottoman State on the 8th of October 1912. The competition between The Party of Unity and Progress and the Party of Freedom and Harmony caused political decision making in the Ottoman State to be unhealthy at the time. Despite not being a party to the war, Russia’s role as patron and supporter is very important. The Ottomans had discharged 200 divisions (approximately 75,000 men) just before the start of the war, which caused great hardship in the Balkans. With the Treaty of London signed in May 1913, the First Balkan War came to an end; Crete became a part of Greece, Albania was forced to declare independence under risk of other Balkan states and Macedonia was completely occupied.

The division of last piece of Ottoman land in the Balkans between Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia is called the “Macedonian Issue”. In this division the Aegean Macedonia passed over to Greece, the Pirin Macedonia assed over to Bulgaria and the Vardar Macedonia passed over to Serbia. Despite small changes during WWI, the former borders were recognised at the end of the war.

Following this humiliation, the Ottomans retreated to the border known as the “Midye-Enez line” which left Edirne and Kirklareli out of Ottoman control.

Bulgaria grew stronger out of the war, thanks to the support given by Russia, the patron of Panslavism. This drew the ire of the other countries in the alliance who joined with Romania to fight Bulgaria without attacking the Ottoman State. With the Treaty of Bucharest, which ended this war on the 10th of August 1913, Dobruca became a part of Romania and Kavala became a part of Greece. With weakening Bulgaria moving troops from its eastern front, the Ottoman forces could advance beyond the Midye-Enez line and reclaim its former borders without fighting. Between 1812 and 1918 there have been five agreements called the Treaty of Bucharest. This particular one is the third.

Following the Second Balkan War the Ottoman Empire and the Kingdom of Bulgaria signed the Treaty of Istanbul according to which Edirne, Kirklareli and Dimetoka remained Ottoman while Dedeagac and Kavala became Bulgarian. The Meric River was taken to form the border. On the 14th of November 1913, the Treaty of Athens was signed with Greece and Greece got Crete, Thessaloniki and Yanya. Serbia and Montenegro thus no longer shared a border with the Ottoman Empire.
After the Balkan War, there was unrest among allied European states. The strong position of imperial Britain and France had long been a concern for Germany. Meanwhile, rivalry between Catholics and Protestants was also important. That Prussia should beat Austria and unite Germany made the country the leading industrial and manpower country on the continent. Germans were encouraged by then superpower Britain’s lack of land contact with Continental Europe.

The German Empire which was established on the 18th of January 1871 with the Treaty of Versailles gathered all German principalities except for Austria under it and started establishing colonies from 1884 onwards. By 1914 it had become on par or even more advanced than Britain, France and Russia economically and militarily. The most important political factor in Europe between 1871 and 1914 was rivalry between France and Germany.

In a world which had many reasons for a world war, the eventual trigger was the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Hungary in Sarajevo on the 28th of June 1914 by Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip. With the assassination the sole remaining heir of the Habsburg dynasty was killed and the only factor uniting Austria and Hungary collapsed.

In this process, Austria relied on German support if needed and delivered a diplomatic note to Serbia that was so tough in its terms that no independent state could accept it. Serbia tried to avoid the issue. On the 28th of July 1914 Austria declared on Serbia and besieged Belgrade.

On the 31st of July Russia called general mobilisation. Germany had previously called mobilisation in Russia a casus belli. Germany declared war on Russia on the 1st of August, declared on France on the 3rd of August and attacked Belgium, which had denied it right of passage on the 4th of August 1914. Britain declared war on Germany and the WWI begun.

Among the events leading to the WWI, the weakness of the Ottomans in Tripoli and the Balkans played a major role. These wars have triggered new wars in Germany. The Ottoman State would side with Germany against the Allies in the WWI and the process would eventually lead to the establishment of the Republic of Turkey following the War of Independence.