Bosnian Crisis

By Marc Stefan Peters

Summary

In the narrow sense, the so-called “Bosnian Crisis” (or “Annexation Crisis”) of 1908 and 1909 was a political conflict between Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire caused by the (formal) incorporation of Bosnia and Herzegovina into the territory of the Dual Monarchy. In a broader sense, the “crisis” stands for the impact of this incorporation on the most important intergovernmental relations in Europe on the eve of World War I.

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Introduction

The origins of the crisis date back to the Congress of Berlin (13 June to 13 July 1878). In the course of this reorganisation of South East Europe, the Habsburg Empire attained the right to occupy the Ottoman provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the so-called Sanjak of Novi Pazar. Furthermore, the Habsburg Monarchy became the proprietor of state power in Bosnia and Herzegovina: not *de jure*, but *de facto,* because the Treaty of Berlin granted Austria-Hungary the right to build up its own administration in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well.[1] After the outbreak of the Young Turk Revolution in the Ottoman Empire three decades later, Viennese politicians feared that the new rulers of the Sublime Porte would enforce a restoration of Ottoman political power in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In particular, Vienna was afraid that representatives of Bosnia and Herzegovina could be sent to the new Ottoman parliament.[2]

The Austro-Hungarian Approach and the Reactions of Constantinople and Belgrade

Not least because of the enormous efforts Austria-Hungary had invested in the infrastructural development of Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1878 and 1918, the *Ballhausplatz* aimed at

avoiding such a scenario at any price. On 6 October 1908, the Habsburg Monarchy informed the Ottoman Empire of its "annexation" of Bosnia and Herzegovina, stressing at the same time that the k. u. k. army would be withdrawn from the Sanjak of Novi Pazar.[3] In other words, from this time on, Austria-Hungary was also *de jure* the ruler of Bosnia and Herzegovina. For the time being, the monarchy's step was strongly rejected in Constantinople. On 26 February 1909, the Habsburg-Ottoman crisis was resolved by a bilateral compromise, which *inter alia* provided certain privileges for the Muslim population of Bosnia and Herzegovina.[4]

It is evident that the Habsburg Monarchy pursued yet another goal when it formally incorporated Bosnia and Herzegovina, namely the containment of the South Slav movement.[5] Against this background, it is not surprising that the historian Zijad Šehić emphasizes that Francis Joseph I, Emperor of Austria (1830-1916) already announced the future constitutional order of Bosnia and Herzegovina within his proclamation to the Bosnian-Herzegovinian people issued on the occasion of the "annexation."[6] Concerning Austria-Hungary's neighbour, Serbia, which claimed Bosnia and Herzegovina within the context of its own national ambitions, it is easily understandable that the reaction of the Serbian public to the Danube Monarchy's "annexation" of the (former) Ottoman territories was more than vehement. The vast majority of the Serbian people demanded war with Vienna – even at the price of a possible defeat.[7]

Russia's Reaction and the Reinforcement of European Alliances

At the time of the "annexation", Serbia's traditional protecting power, Russia, was weakened because of the drawback it suffered at the end of the Russian-Japanese War in 1905. In the run-up to the formal incorporation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Austria-Hungary's ambassador to Russia, Leopold Graf Berchtold (1863-1942), arranged a personal meeting of Alois Lexa von Aehrenthal (1854-1912), the Austro-Hungarian minister of foreign affairs, and Aleksandr Petrovich Izvolʹskiĭ (1856-1919), Aerenthal's Russian counterpart, at Buchlau on 2 and 3 September 1908. On this occasion, Izvolʹskiĭ recognised Vienna's right to incorporate Bosnia and Herzegovina, but he insisted on a discussion of the question at hand (as well as that of the Dardanelles) within the scope of a prior international conference. Aerenthal did not inform Izvolʹskiĭ about the intended date of incorporation and did not mention the fact that Austria-Hungary aimed at executing its project without consultation with other (relevant) political powers.[8] This amounted to a diplomatic defeat of Russia, followed by massive protests by the Russian public.[9] During the crisis, Germany had stressed its willingness to

support its ally Austria-Hungary.[10] Russia grew closer to France and Great Britain in the further course of events.[11] The constellation of World War I powers emerged more clearly during and after the so-called “Bosnian Crisis” of 1908 and 1909.

Marc Stefan Peters, Independent Scholar

Notes

1. Geller, Leo: Bosnisch-hercegovinische Verfassungs- und politische Grundgesetze, Vienna 1910; p. 2. ↑
2. Vocelka, Karl: Das Osmanische Reich und die Habsburgermonarchie 1848-1918, in: Wandruszka, Adam / Urbanitsch, Peter (eds.): Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848-1918, vol. VI: Die Habsburgermonarchie im System der internationalen Beziehungen, Vienna 1993; p. 268. ↑
3. Ibid. ↑
4. Ibid., pp. 269-270. ↑
5. Vranešević, Branislav: Die außenpolitischen Beziehungen zwischen Serbien und der Habsburgermonarchie, in: Wandruszka / Urbanitsch (eds.), Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848-1918, pp. 370-371. ↑
6. Šehić, Zijad: Aneksiona kriza 1908-1909. i njene posljedice na međunarodne odnose [The Annexation Crisis 1908-1909 and its Impact on International Relations], in: Šehić, Zijad (ed.): Međunarodna konferencija Bosna i Hercegovina u okviru Austro-Ugarske 1878-1918, Zbornik radova [International Conference Bosnia and Herzegovina in Austria-Hungary 1878 to 1918, Collection of Essays], Sarajevo 2011, p. 62. ↑
7. Vranešević, Die außenpolitischen 1993, p. 371. ↑
8. Wakounig, Marija: Dissens versus Konsens. Das Österreichbild in Rußland während der Franzsiko-Josephinischen Ära, in: Wandruszka / Urbanitsch (eds.), Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848-1918, pp. 480-481. ↑
9. Ibid., pp. 483ff. ↑
10. Šehić, Aneksiona kriza 2011, p. 80. ↑
11. Ibid., p. 84. ↑

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