

Civilian and Military Power (South East Europe)

By [John Paul Newman](#)

In pre-war South East Europe, both civilian and military powers focused on the creation of independent national states and the reclamation of imperial *irredenta*. This goal, aggressively pursued, created serious regional tension between imperial and national states, between conflicting national programmes (especially those of Bulgaria and Serbia), and even between civilian and military power sources *within* states themselves. During the First World War, these conflicts intensified and were played out under occupation and in exile and emigration, in some cases to their conclusion (by the end of the war or its immediate aftermath), in other cases not (e.g. Bulgaria). This article shows how civil and military relations during the First World War represent a continuation of conflicting state-building goals in the context of the World War, as well as a continuation of the prominent role played by both civil and military powers in these state-building projects.

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1. Introduction

By the last quarter of the 19th century the national states of South East Europe, as well as the Great Powers themselves, took the eventual demise of the [Ottoman Empire](#) as a given. The crisis this caused, and its management by the Great Powers, was known as the "Eastern Question". The Eastern Question was, of course, a vexed one, not only because of the Great Power rivalries it engendered, but also because no agreement could leave all the states of South East Europe satisfied: their maximalist territorial claims, everywhere asserted, were in most cases mutually exclusive. The Treaty of Berlin (1878), made in the wake of anti-Ottoman uprisings and war in Bosnia, conferred internationally recognized borders upon the national movements in South East Europe but also created ready-made *irredenta* towards which civilian and military powers could strive. The conflict between South East European nationalizing states and the Ottoman Empire *and* the conflict between those states themselves eventually came to a head in the [Balkan Wars](#) of 1912-1913. In the first war of 1912, the Balkan League states ([Serbia](#), [Montenegro](#), [Bulgaria](#), and [Greece](#)) had come together in a diplomatic and political alliance in order to expel the Ottomans from their European possessions. The quick realization of this goal exposed the absence of further common ground between the Balkan states, leading to the second Balkan War, waged between Bulgaria and her former allies (and now also [Romania](#) and the Ottoman Empire) over territorial claims in [Macedonia](#).^[1] Bulgaria's disastrous attack on Serbia, the *casus belli* of the war of 1913, was brought in part by the army pushing civilian leaders towards a more belligerent line vis-à-vis the recovery of national *irredenta*.

This kind of internal conflict, which was an important feature of the relationship between civilian and military power in South East Europe during the period, was present, too, in Serbia. Here, the divisions between certain militarist groups within the army's officer corps and the country's civilian government had been exposed in the aftermath of the Balkan Wars, during a quarrel over control of the newly acquired territories in the south. Here, the civilian and military conflict in Serbia pitted the government of [Nikola Pašić \(1845-1926\)](#), supported by Crown Prince [Alexander Karadjordjević \(1888-1934\)](#), against the powerful militarist faction Unification or Death (the [Black Hand](#)), led by the army's chief of intelligence, Colonel [Dragutin Dimitrijević \(1876-1917\)](#), known as "Apis", and backed by sections of the political opposition.^[2]

The departure of the Ottomans from South East Europe and Serbia's spectacular military accomplishments in the Balkan Wars brought [Austria-Hungary](#) closer into the fold of South East European affairs. Since the Belgrade Palace Coup of 1903 (the so-called "May Coup") the Kingdom of Serbia had drifted away from the orbit of the Dual Monarchy and towards that of Czarist [Russia](#).^[3] Relations between Austria-Hungary and Serbia were ever more strained in the first decade of the 20th century, especially following the [Austro-Hungarian annexation of Bosnia](#) in 1908. With the Balkan Wars victories, Serbia gained almost all of the territories its leaders coveted to the south, leaving only Habsburg Bosnia, with its large Serb population, a territory that had been administered (under occupation) by Austria-Hungary since the Treaty of Berlin. Some kind of confrontation

between the two states seemed certain; indeed, such a showdown was strongly desired by the Austro-Hungarian army, whose chief of staff, [Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf \(1852-1925\)](#), harboured a powerful antipathy towards Serbia and its politics. The occasion for a reckoning came on 28 June 1914 and was delivered by a young Bosnian Serb nationalist, [Gavrilo Princip \(1894-1918\)](#). Austria-Hungary levelled blame for the Sarajevo crime at "official Serbia", and in this way found the *casus belli* it needed to confront Serbia. But in fact the assassination was organized and executed largely without the knowledge and blessing of Nikola Pašić's government, which was in the middle of a closely-fought election campaign and still trying to consolidate civilian control of the territories won during the Balkan Wars. It was Apis and his allies in the Black Hand who had armed Princip and his friends to kill [Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este \(1863-1914\)](#), and this reckless act deepened the antagonisms in Serbian civil-military relations.

The decision for war, then, was largely out of Serbian hands, but in the remaining states in the Balkans the decision to intervene or not to intervene, and if to intervene, in whose favour, exposed the contradictions between civil and military powers that were a key characteristic of the Balkan states during the First World War. The Bulgarian decision was perhaps the most straightforward, and the declaration in favour of the Central Powers (October 1915) was based on the promise of gaining lands it had "lost" during the Balkan Wars. Romania was more divided, especially between the pro-German (and therefore pro-Central Powers) [Carol I, King of Romania \(1839-1914\)](#), and the pro-Allied Prime Minister [Ion I. C. Brătianu \(1864-1927\)](#), who was more in tune with the popular Francophone sentiments of the country. Romania went to war against Austria-Hungary in August 1916. Similarly, Greece was split into two opposing camps: that of [Constantine I, King of Greece \(1868-1923\)](#), hopeful of a Central Powers victory, and Prime Minister [Eleutherios Venizelos \(1864-1936\)](#), supportive of the Allies, with the army's general staff reluctant to take a side either way. Venizelos' camp eventually won out, and Greece joined the Allies in June 1917.

2. World War

Once the fighting had begun, most observers expected a quick victory for Austria-Hungary against Serbian forces in South East Europe.^[4] The imperial army hoped that a rapid punitive campaign against Serbia could be wrapped up in short order so that it could devote its attention to larger tasks in the east. But Austro-Hungarian military leaders had seriously underestimated the weight of military power in the region, and its armies soon suffered shock defeats at the hands of the Serbs, notably at the battle of Mount Cer in August 1914 (remembered in Serbia as the first Entente victory of the Great War) and at Kolubara.

The military balance did not tip in Austria-Hungary's favour until the end of 1915, when Serbia was attacked by a joint force of German and Austro-Hungarian armies from the north and the west and, decisively, by Bulgaria from the east. The Central Powers had enticed Bulgaria to join them with promises of recovering lands "lost" to Serbia during the second Balkan War. After the defeat, the Serbian army and government, along with a number of civilian refugees, evacuated the country via

Albania to the coast at Durrës, then to the island of Corfu, and eventually to the Allied front at Salonika. The decision was a costly and difficult one, but, from the perspective of Serbia's leaders, the alternatives were even more dire: on the one hand, it was impossible to carry on fighting with such overwhelming military powers arraigned against them; on the other hand, capitulation to Austria-Hungary, and now also to Bulgaria, seemed to entail a decisive end to civilian and military power in Serbia. Both Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria sought a reckoning with Serbia, one that would rule out any restoration of the kind of state that had rivalled their interests and influence in the years before the outbreak of the war.

3. Occupation(s)

This desire for a reckoning can be seen in the Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian [occupations of Serbia](#) from 1915 to 1918, during which both states attempted to remould the lands they occupied in their own fashion. Austria-Hungary sought to denude Serbia of the nationalizing and expansionist drives that had characterized its civilian and especially military powers before 1914. Serbian schools and cultural associations were closed down, political parties and newspapers banned. Serbian cultural, political, and military elites in particular were targeted, since they were seen by the Austro-Hungarian occupation regime as most responsible for the pre-war sins of the Serbian state, and also the most likely quarters from which the state would re-emerge. As a guard against anti-occupation guerrillas and resistance, men between the ages of eighteen and fifty were routinely interned. Such measures extended into Bosnia and Dalmatia, areas under Habsburg military governorship during the First World War.

In contrast, the battle in the lands occupied and annexed by Bulgaria was between two competing but largely identical nationalizing military and civilian powers. By most measures, the Bulgarian occupation of southern Serbia (Bulgaria also reclaimed lands in Macedonia and Thrace that it had lost following the second Balkan War) was more severe than that of Austria-Hungary. The Bulgarian state had the same nationalizing agenda as Serbia: the intention here was not only to erase traces of Serbian national culture but also to fully nationalize the territories in its own image as part of their incorporation into an expanded Bulgaria. The Bulgarian civilian and military powers rightly saw in Serbia and its people a powerful rival for the national character of the regions in question. In a sense, Serbia's defeat in 1915 had swung the pendulum back from its victories in 1913. After their victories in the second Balkan War, Serbia had begun a programme for incorporating the "newly associated" lands into the state, which involved their "nationalization" through the construction of Serbian churches and schools, colonization, and the removal of "a-national" culture (non-Serbian, [churches](#), [schools](#), language, etc.). The pendulum would swing back again with Bulgaria's defeat in 1918, and the dynamics of destruction and creation would once again be inverted. The conflict for the nationalization of these parts of South East Europe had existed, in latent or not so latent form, since the beginning of the 20th century, despite the temporary alliances or agreements forged between the nationalizing states of South East Europe (e.g. on the eve of the first Balkan War). Ultimately, their programmes of national revolution overlapped and therefore rivalled one another. They were bound

to collide.

4. Irregular Military Power

Both Bulgaria and Serbia could draw upon their traditions of irregular military power to assist in this conflict. In South East Europe there had been a tradition of banditry dating back to the early modern period and beyond. Around the turn of the 20th century, this banditry became less desultory and more political, as the nationalizing states of South East Europe came to look upon paramilitary formations as an extra arm in their drive against the Ottomans and regional rivals.^[5] Each of the states of South East Europe – Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, and Greece – had its own tradition of irregular military power: small groups of paramilitary soldiers known in the Slavic languages as *četnici*, and to the Ottomans as *Komitadji*. In Bulgaria's case, these forces were represented by a group of Macedonian autonomists known by various names, but most frequently and (in-)famously as the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO).^[6] Similar to the relationship between the Serbian state and its irregular forces, the Bulgarian state and the VMRO had frequently been at odds in the years before the First World War. The final status of Macedonia, once liberated from the Ottomans, was a bone of contention between Sofia and the VMRO. The latter generally hoped that these lands would eventually gain independence, whereas Sofia foresaw Macedonia unifying with Bulgaria in the same manner as Rumelia (in 1885). Matters were further complicated by the "Supreme Macedonian Committee" (the "Supremacists"), a Bulgarian-based paramilitary group which sought the unification of Macedonia with Bulgaria. But whatever the differences in outlook and aim between the VMRO and Sofia in the pre-war years, after 1914 the Macedonian paramilitaries "identified completely with the Bulgarian cause",^[7] and during the occupation VMRO men helped to police the Bulgarian occupation and annexation and to carry out the Bulgarian army's nationalizing mission in these parts.

The Serbian state, under such duress, could call upon its own paramilitary traditions, for Serbian *četnici* had also been operating in South East Europe since around the beginning of the 20th century.^[8] Before the war these irregulars had been at the disposal of the Serbian state; now, in occupation, the Serbian government attempted to direct their actions against the occupying forces. The strains in this relationship were most apparent during the so-called "Toplica Uprising", a popular Serbian revolt directed against first Bulgarian and then later Bulgarian and Austro-Hungarian occupation, which began in 1917 when the Bulgarian army forcibly and illegally attempted to conscript Serbian men into its ranks. The separation of the Serbian government (in exile at Salonika) from the battlefield made it difficult to prosecute the uprising effectively, however. Then there were guerrilla leaders such as [Kosta Milovanović Pećanac \(1879-1944\)](#), whom the Serbian High Command dropped into the eye of the occupation storm in order to inflame the uprising, but who instead attempted to curtail it, fearing that too much Serbian blood would be split in reprisal. And in addition to this, there were the rivalries between the various guerrilla leaders themselves, each with their own agenda, fiefdoms and ideas about how the battle against occupation should be waged.

5. Exile and Emigration

Meanwhile, at Salonika, the Serbian government used the extreme circumstances of war and exile to settle accounts with pre-war rivals and to redress the balance between civilian and military power in the country's national affairs. Unification or Death continued to challenge the civilian power of Pašić's government, and that of Crown Prince Alexander, too. The exigencies of war gave the civilian leaders of Serbia the cover they needed to confront and defeat this militarist clique. This they did in the summer of 1917, staging a rigged trial against the group's leaders, the purpose of which was to end Apis and his cohort's ability to meddle in politics and to encroach upon the jurisdiction of the state's civilian leaders. Apis was found guilty of masterminding a (fictitious) plot to assassinate the crown prince; he was shot by firing squad along with two of his associates.^[9] The primacy of civilian over military power in Serbia was thus re-asserted. The "Salonika Trial" of Apis and his allies, as Andrej Mitrović has noted, was the final strike in an on-going conflict between civilian and military powers in Serbia; it was the Serbian government's checkmate against a powerful and autonomous rival.^[10]

There was one final cleavage in civilian and military power in Serbia. The conflict with Austria-Hungary had raised the matter of South Slav unification, which the Serbian government had announced as one of its war aims following the Austro-Hungarian attack of 1914. Towards this goal, the Serbian Prime Minister Nikola Pašić was virtually compelled to negotiate with the "Yugoslav Committee" (*Jugoslovenski odbor*, JO), a small group of émigré Habsburg South Slavs, mainly Croats from Dalmatia, who had left Austria-Hungary soon after the outbreak of the war and who were now working strenuously in Allied capitals to create a solution to the South Slav question outside of the Dual Monarchy.^[11] The JO's small size was somewhat offset by its influential connections, especially those between the committee's leaders [Ante Trumbić \(1864-1938\)](#) and [Frano Supilo \(1870-1917\)](#), and [Henry Wickham Steed \(1871-1956\)](#), the British journalist and editor of *The Times*, and [Robert William Seton-Watson \(1879-1951\)](#), founder (in 1916) of the periodical *The New Europe*. The JO were part of a constellation of émigré groups and individuals from central and eastern Europe at work in Allied capitals during the war promoting their peoples' cause against the Central Powers. This constellation's number included the Polish piano maestro [Ignacy Paderewski \(1860-1941\)](#), and, of course, the Czech émigrés [Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk \(1850-1937\)](#) and [Edvard Beneš \(1884-1948\)](#). Like them, the JO were attempting to create a state "from abroad" by rallying support from diaspora groups and Allied friends. It was a task made difficult in the face of Allied reluctance to countenance the dismemberment of Austria-Hungary. Like the Czechs, the JO saw the value of forging a symbol of military resistance to Austria-Hungary as a propaganda (if not a military) counterweight to the many thousands of their countrymen fighting in the ranks of the imperial army. Trumbić and Supilo tried to raise a pro-Allied South Slav volunteer force just as Masaryk and Beneš attempted to raise a "Czech Legion". However, due to wrangles between the JO and Nikola Pašić over the structure of the future South Slav state, relations between the JO and the Serbian government resembled not so much the powerful and largely unified Czech and Slovak groups abroad as they did the competing and contradictory positions of the various émigré and domestic

groups invested in [Poland's](#) national future. The disagreements between the JO and Nikola Pašić about the common future of the South Slav could be seen as the problem of integrating very different programmes of national integration and state formation; or perhaps, as some have suggested, the problem was more simply a manifestation of Pašić's reluctance to relinquish any control over the project of South Slav state building.^[12] For despite his government's professed support for the "liberation and unification" of all South Slavs, Pašić apparently saw the proposed South Slav state as a direct successor of pre-war Serbia. This was not a reciprocal arrangement: Serbian civilian and military power would be extended into the Habsburg lands (and into Montenegro, for that matter) in much the same fashion as they had been in the 'southern regions' of Macedonia and Kosovo after the Balkan Wars.

6. The End of the War

In any case, agreements over the future of the state remained very ill-defined throughout the war. When Serbia broke through the Salonika Front and Bulgaria capitulated in September 1918, these matters were far from settled. Due to the rural unrest that raged throughout the Croat hinterland at the end of the war, the National Council of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs, the group of Habsburg South Slav politicians who had inherited the monarchy's lands, agreed to union with Serbia (and now also Montenegro) and to invite the Serbian army into the territories they now controlled. The National Council also saw that Serbian military power was needed to stave off Italy's territorial claims in the region. Serbian military and civilian leaders were now faced with the challenge of integrating their own institutions and political structures with those of the formerly Habsburg South Slav Lands and Montenegro and, for that, matter, territories such as Macedonia and Kosovo, which had not been fully incorporated into the Serbian state during the brief interbellum of 1913-1914. They also had to come to terms with the legacy of conflict and killing which had taken place within the borders of what was now the [Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes](#). Austria-Hungary was gone, and with it the dynastic principle. All ideas for a federal restructuring of the empire, or for its trialist reorganization, had gone too. South East Europe after 1918 fully entered the era of the nation-state; the legacy of the Treaty of Berlin had been fulfilled.

With the end of the war, Montenegrin statehood evaporated, too, as the tiny kingdom was subsumed into the South Slav state following a dubious plebiscite on the terms of unification with Serbia.^[13] [Albania](#), somewhat miraculously, regained its independence (achieved in 1912 but lost during the First World War), although to a great extent this tiny state continued to be the plaything of its larger neighbours, just as it had been on the eve of the war. The end of the war also brought a dramatic reconfiguration of military and civilian powers in Bulgaria: with the defeat in 1918, [Ferdinand I, Tsar of Bulgaria \(1861-1948\)](#) turned away from the forces that had prosecuted Bulgaria's unsuccessful war and towards the anti-war Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BANU) and its leader [Aleksandŭr Stamboliyski \(1879-1923\)](#). Stamboliyski had been opposed to Bulgaria's war from the beginning and for this he had been imprisoned during the war.^[14] From 1918 to 1923 Stamboliyski

attempted to chart a new direction in Bulgarian national politics, steering the country away from its nationalizing drives of the past (he abandoned Bulgarian claims on Macedonia and signed a conciliatory treaty with the South Slav state in 1923) and in a direction more amenable to the post-war status quo in Europe. But Stamboliyski had miscalculated the balance between civilian and military power in Bulgaria. In June 1923 he suffered a grim fate at the hands of a powerful consortium of militarist and political forces whose adherents were unhappy with the direction in which the agrarian leader was leading the country. This was the so-called "9 June Coup D'Etat" of 1923, which resulted in a reassertion of the old nationalizing agenda, now a revisionist agenda in post-war Europe, to which the Bulgarian state remained committed throughout the interwar period, and which led it into the fold of the Axis powers during the Second World War. The ghosts of San Stefano had not been exorcised, and aside from brief interludes, Bulgarian civilian and military powers were committed to repossessing their *irredenta*.

7. Conclusion

In South East Europe in the years before and during the First World War, the demarcations between civilian and military power were not at all clear. The Rubicon that divided national armies and militarist groups (on the one side) and civilian politicians and their parties (on the other) was frequently crossed, both sides meddled in each other's affairs. Such tangled relations between civilian and military power were largely a symptom of the prominence of the military factor in the transition of South East European states away from imperial, and especially Ottoman, rule, and their continued desire to play a role in state-building projects in South East Europe. Nevertheless, this was not a manifestation of any kind of primitivism on the part of the states of South East Europe: national, peasant armies had achieved a high level of modernization and organization on the eve of the war, evident in the efficient mobilizations of 1912 and 1914, and in their impressive performances against larger forces during the First World War. Both civil and military power in South East Europe, in war and in peace, were directed towards advancing the national cause, and in this sense, they were profoundly modern.

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Notes

1. ↑ For a military history of the Balkan wars with strong coverage of Bulgaria's affairs, see Hall, Richard C.: *The Balkan Wars, 1912-1913. Prelude to the First World War*, London et al. 2000.
2. ↑ Petrovich, Michael Boro: *A History of Modern Serbia. 1804-1918*, vol. 2, New York 1976, pp. 610f.

3. † See: Vucinich, Wayne: Serbia between East and West. The Events of 1903-1908, Stanford 1954.
4. † The best English-language account of military and political developments in Serbia during the First World War is: Mitrović, Andrej: Serbia's Great War. 1914-1918, London 2005. This is a translated and abridged version of: Mitrović, Andrej: Srbija u prvom svetskom ratu [Serbia in the First World War], Belgrade 2004.
5. † Biondich, Mark: The Balkans. Revolution, War, and Political Violence since 1878, Oxford 2011, pp. 70ff.
6. † On the VMRO, see: Perry, Duncan: The Politics of Terror. The Macedonian Revolutionary Movements 1893-1903, Durham 1988; Swire, John: Bulgarian Conspiracy, London 1939.
7. † Rossos, Andrew: Macedonia and the Macedonians. A History, Stanford 2008, p. 129.
8. † On the Serbian irregulars, see: Krakov, Stanislav: Plamen četništva [The Flame of Chetnikdom], Belgrade 1930; Simić, Stevan: Srpska revolucionarna organizacija. komitsko četovanje u staroj Srbiji i Makedoniji 1903-1912 [The Serbian Revolutionary Organization. Komitadja-Chetniks in old Serbia and Macedonia 1903-1912], Belgrade 1998; Ilić, Vladimir: Srpska četnička akcija 1903-1912 [Serbian Chetnik Activity 1903-1912], Belgrade 2006.
9. † For details of the trial, see: Mackenzie, David: The "Black Hand" on Trial. Salonika, 1917, New York 1995.
10. † Mitrović, Serbia's 2005, pp. 180-89.
11. † Robinson, Connie: Yugoslavism in the Early Twentieth Century. The Politics of the Yugoslav Committee, in: Djokić, Dejan/Ker-Lindsay, James (eds.): New Perspectives on Yugoslavia. Key Issues and Controversies, London 2010.
12. † See: Banac, Ivo: The National Question in Yugoslavia. Origins, History, Politics, Ithaca et al. 1984, especially pp. 115-40.
13. † The "annexation" of Montenegro by Serbia at the end of the First World War is covered in: Pavlović, Srdja: Balkan Anschluss. The Annexation of Montenegro and the Creation of the Common South Slav State, West Lafayette 2008.
14. † On Stamboliyski, see: Bell, John D.: Peasants in Power. Alexander Stambuliski and the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union, Princeton 1977.

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