

War in the Balkans

By [Richard C. Hall](#)

The Balkan Wars erupted in South Eastern Europe in October 1912. Fighting continued intermittently in the region until July 1914. As the First World War expanded into much of Europe, fighting continued throughout the South East until the autumn of 1918. In South Eastern Europe, the Balkan Wars and the First World War must be understood as a single community.

Table of Contents

- [1 Background](#)
- [2 Balkan Wars](#)
- [3 The First World War](#)
- [4 Consequences](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

Background

The role of the Balkan Peninsula in the events leading up to and during the First World War is often limited in modern [historiography](#) to the question of the degree of culpability of the Serbian government in the [Sarajevo assassination](#). South Eastern Europe was, however, an arena of intense diplomatic and military activity before the actual outbreak of, and throughout, the war. All of the countries there, [Bulgaria](#), [Greece](#), [Montenegro](#), the [Ottoman Empire](#), [Romania](#) and [Serbia](#) became involved in the tangle of events that resulted in the outbreak of [war in the Balkan Peninsula](#) in 1912. This helped to bring about the collapse of the Great Power consensus and concluded in general European war lasting until 1918.

These events began in the efforts of the Great Powers to enforce an overall settlement on the Balkan Peninsula in the aftermath of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-1878. The Russians imposed a peace settlement at San Stefano in March 1878 that augmented all the Balkan states, especially Bulgaria, which gained its maximum territorial expectations including Macedonia. Austro-Hungarian and British objections caused German Chancellor [Otto von Bismarck \(1815-1898\)](#) to summon representatives of the Great Powers to Berlin in the summer of 1878. The Congress of Berlin in 1878 established a Great Power aegis over South Eastern Europe. Bulgaria was greatly reduced in size and Macedonia reverted to Ottoman rule. Afterwards, major political changes there required the sanction of the Great Powers. The national states of South Eastern Europe perceived each other as rivals for the remaining European territories of the Ottoman Empire. [Macedonia](#), with its mixed population of Orthodox Slavs, Catholic and Islamic Albanians, Turks, Jews, Roma, Vlachs and others, became the primary target of South Eastern European nationalist aspiration during the last quarter of the 19th century. Bulgarian nationalists had focused on Macedonia ever since the Berlin Settlement restored Ottoman sovereignty in July 1878. Greek and Serbian nationalists also considered Macedonia as theirs by cultural and historical right. As one historian has written, "In fact Macedonia was a microcosm of the Balkans, a mosaic of Muslim, Greek, Bulgarian, Serb, Albanian, Vlach, Jewish and Gypsy communities."^[1] The overlapping claims of the Balkan states to Macedonia undermined their abilities to realize them.

While the settlement imposed upon South Eastern Europe by the Congress of Berlin satisfied the immediate purposes of the Great Powers, it failed to meet the expectations of the nationalist governments there. The regimes in Athens, Belgrade, Bucharest, Cetinje, and Sofia all based their legitimacy to some degree on the achievement of national unity. In doing so they sought to emulate the nationalist examples of the Germans and Italians, who had succeeded in unifying their peoples in nationalist states. Several issues were clear. These [nationalist](#) strivings would continue. Any nationalist advance, however, would have to obtain the sanction of the Great Powers. This compelled the Balkan states to establish subordinate but fragile relationships with individual Great Powers, especially [Austria-Hungary](#) and [Russia](#). These relationships were based upon the realization that the Ottomans would make no concessions without force, and that the Balkan peoples themselves lacked the power to force the Ottomans to do so. An attempt by the Greeks to resolve the issue of Crete and gain some Ottoman European territories ended in the total defeat in the Greek Ottoman War of 1897.

In the 1890s the rival Balkan states formed terrorist societies to take more direct action. The largest of these was the [Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization](#) (IMRO) founded in 1893. It officially advocated an autonomous Macedonia, but maintained strong Bulgarian connections. Even so, its slogan was "Macedonia for the Macedonians." The Bulgarian government and military sponsored another group, the so called Supremists, who supported direct annexation of Macedonia by Bulgaria. Through these two organizations the Bulgarians dominated the Orthodox peoples in Macedonia. Greek and Serbian armed bands also roamed through the back country of Macedonia.

By the turn of the century the situation in Macedonia had become explosive. After a premature revolt in Gorna Dzhumaya (Blagoevgrad) in North Eastern Macedonia in 1902, IMRO rose throughout much of central Macedonia the next year in August 1903. This became known as the St. Elias' Day (*Ilinden*) revolt. The Ottomans quickly suppressed this at a high cost in lives and property. The Sofia government found itself impotent to help. In the short term Bulgarian influence in Macedonia waned because of this failure to intervene. In October 1903, the Austrians and Russians proposed a policy of reform in Macedonia: the *Müzsteg* program. This reform envisioned the reorganization of the police and the judiciary of Macedonia under some Austrian and Russian oversight. Actually it accomplished little.

The pace of events quickened throughout South Eastern Europe in 1908 when on 23 July, the [Committee for Union and Progress](#) seized power in Constantinople. This organization, known as the Young Turks, had formed from an amalgamation of several reform-minded groups in the Ottoman Empire the previous year and was based in Salonika. Many of its members were junior officers in the Ottoman army. After their coup, the Young Turks announced a program of reform. These reforms included restoration of the 1876 constitution, promotion of an Ottoman identity, and military modernization.

The possibility of a reformed and strengthened Ottoman Empire alarmed the Great Powers, especially Austria-Hungary and Russia. In an effort to protect their aspirations and interests in South Eastern Europe from possible Ottoman revival, Russian foreign minister [Alexander Izvolsky \(1856-1919\)](#) met with the Austro-Hungarian foreign minister [Alois Lexa von Aehrenthal \(1854-1912\)](#) at Buchlau, Moravia on 16 September 1908. There, the two ministers agreed that Russia would not oppose an Austrian annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. In return the Austrians would not object to an increased Russian presence in the Straits. Before the Russians could gain the agreement of the other Great Powers, the Austro-Hungarians announced the annexation of the Ottoman Provinces on 6 October. The day before, by prior arrangement with the Austrians, Prince Ferdinand, later [Ferdinand I, Tsar of Bulgaria \(1861-1948\)](#) declared Bulgaria's complete independence from the Ottoman Empire and assumed the title *Tsar* in emulation of his medieval predecessors. These actions provoked the [Bosnian Crisis](#). The Russians were angry. They thought the Austrians had betrayed the agreement made at Buchlau. The Montenegrins and Serbs also were furious. The Montenegrins had long coveted Herzegovina, while the Serbs wanted Bosnia. Austria-Hungary's evacuation of its garrisons in the Sandjak of Novi Pazar did little to assuage either Montenegro or Serbia. Yet they were unable to act against Austria-Hungary without Great Power support, which was not forthcoming.

The implications of the Young Turk Revolt and the breach of the Berlin Settlement resulting from the Bosnian Crisis had a profound impact on the Balkan states. Clearly they too had to act to obtain their national agendas before the Young Turk reforms reinvigorated the Ottoman Empire. As early as October 1908, mainly in response to the annexation crisis, the Montenegrins and the Serbs began to explore the possibility of an alliance. By the next year this effort had waned. In August 1909, however, a coup in Athens by a cabal of military officers resulted in the assumption of prime minister by [Eleutherios Venizelos \(1864-1936\)](#) the next year. A native of Crete, he was determined to realize the Greek nationalist agenda known as the Megali Idea. The Greeks coveted Ottoman territories in Albania, Asia Minor and Macedonia as well in the islands of the Aegean. In 1910 he made an overture to Sofia for an alliance.

That same year the Ottoman position began to deteriorate in Albania. Up until the turn of the century the Albanians had been among the most loyal Ottoman subjects in Europe. Concerns about the Ottomanization policies of the Young Turks, however, led to the outbreak of a revolt in the northern Albanian regions. Nikola I, King of Montenegro (1841-1921), who had adopted the royal title in 1910, abetted and encouraged this revolt.

Before action began on the Greek initiative, Bulgarian-Serbian negotiations resumed. With the strong support of the Russian minister in Belgrade, Nicholas Hartwig (1855-1914) and the Russian minister in Sofia, Anatoli Neklyudov (1856-1934), the Bulgarian and Serbian governments reached an arrangement. On 13 March 1912, the Bulgarians and Serbs signed a treaty of alliance which provided for joint action against any aggressor. The real purpose of this agreement was a war against the Ottoman Empire. A secret annex assigned specific Ottoman territories to Bulgaria and Serbia, and nodded to the concept of Macedonian autonomy. By this agreement, Serbia was to obtain the [Sanjak of Novi Pazar](#), Kosovo, while Bulgaria would receive southern Macedonia. Macedonian territory southeast of the Šar Mountains and northwest of Veles, including Skopje and Kumanovo, was regarded as a “contested zone,” over whose disposal [Nicholas II, Emperor of Russia \(1868-1918\)](#) would arbitrate if the Bulgarians and Serbs could not agree between themselves.

Other bilateral arrangements among the Bulgarians, Greeks, Montenegrins and Serbs soon followed the Bulgarian-Serb alliance. The most important of these was the Bulgarian-Greek alliance signed 29 May 1912. Significantly it contained no territorial provisions. Because of the poor performance of the Greek army in fighting against the Ottomans in the brief war of 1897, the Bulgarians thought that they would have little difficulty in realizing their territorial ambitions to the south. By the summer of 1912 a loose Balkan League had formed. The Balkan allies were anxious to act before the Ottomans concluded their war in North Africa against [Italy](#).

Balkan Wars

The Montenegrins began the war on 8 October. This action initiated a cycle of fighting in South Eastern Europe that would continue until 1918. For the inhabitants of the Balkans, the First World War began in October 1912. The other Balkan allies followed on 18 October. Each Balkan ally fought a separate campaign against the Ottomans. Geography dictated that Thrace, located between the Bulgarian border and the Ottoman capital Constantinople, became the main theater of war. Three Bulgarian armies invaded eastern Thrace. One screened the important Ottoman fortress town of Adrianople (Odrin, Edirne) while on 29-31 October two further Bulgarian armies smashed the Ottomans in the battle of Lyule Burgas-Buni Hisar (Lüle Burgaz-Pınarhisar). The victorious Bulgarians pursued the Ottomans to their defensive positions at Chataldza (Çatalca), about twenty miles outside of Constantinople. There, on 16-17 November, the Bulgarians attempted to force the lines and seize the ancient imperial city. Cholera and exhaustion plus determined Ottoman resistance prevented the Bulgarians from attaining their objective.

Meanwhile the main Serbian army crushed the Ottoman forces in western Macedonia at Kumanovo on 24 October. While Ottoman army remnants retreated into central Albania, the Serbs occupied Kosovo and much of northern Albania. To the south, the Greek navy played an important role in bottling up the Ottoman fleet in the Dardanelles. This meant that the Ottomans could not transfer troops from Anatolia to the Balkans by sea. Their control of the sea also enabled the Greeks to occupy the Aegean islands of Chios, Limnos and Mitylene. The Greek army advanced into Ottoman territory along two axes. One element hurried north to Salonika (Thessaloniki), which it entered on 8 November, one day ahead of a Bulgarian force which had the same objective. The other Greek army moved in the northwest to bring the town of Ioannina (Janina) under siege. A small Montenegrin force entered the Sanjak of Novi Pazar. Most Montenegrin troops, however, brought the northern Albanian town of Scutari (Shkodër) under siege. All their attempts to take the town by direct assault failed.

Having suffered defeat on every front, the Ottomans requested an armistice. This was finalized at Chataldza on 3 December 1912. At this point, Ottoman Europe consisted of only the territory between the Chataldza lines and Constantinople, the Gallipoli peninsula, and the three besieged cities of Adrianople, Janina and Scutari. After the conclusion of the armistice, negotiations between the Balkan allies and the Ottomans shifted to London. The Greeks remained apart from the armistice negotiations. Two parallel conferences held there during December attempted to resolve the conflict. The first was a meeting of the representatives of the belligerent sides. Delegations from Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro, Serbia and the Ottoman Empire attended the London Peace Conference. At the same time the ambassadors of the Great Powers to Great Britain also met, presided over by the British foreign secretary Edward Grey (1862-1933), in the London Ambassadors' Conference to ensure that their own interests in the Balkans were preserved by any settlement.

When the extent of the Ottoman defeat became clear, a group of Albanian notables in Vlorë proclaimed an independent Albanian state on 28 November 1912. Urged on by the representatives of Austria-Hungary and Italy, the Ambassadors' Conference soon recognized the new state. This new Albania claimed much territory overrun by the Serbs. The Austrian and Italian protectors of the new state insisted that the Serbs evacuate northern Albania. Meanwhile the London belligerents' conference foundered, mainly on the issue of Adrianople which the Ottomans insisted on retaining. When the Young Turks again seized power in Constantinople at the end of January 1913, they denounced the armistice.

The war resumed on 3 February 1913. The three besieged Ottoman cities soon fell. Janina surrendered to the Greeks on 6 March. The Bulgarians, with some Serbian help, took Adrianople on 26 March. Austro-Hungarian pressure forced Serbian troops aiding the Montenegrins at Scutari to withdraw in April. Even though the Great Powers decided in London to assign Scutari in the new Albanian state, Montenegrin forces continued their siege. The weary defenders of Scutari finally negotiated its surrender on 22 April. This provoked an international crisis. On Austro-Hungarian insistence, the Great Powers backed their demand that the Montenegrins withdraw, with threats of armed intervention. Under these circumstances, the Montenegrins agreed to leave Scutari on 5 May 1913. After these further losses, the Ottomans agreed to terms. The Balkan War belligerents signed a preliminary peace treaty in London on 30 May 1913. This agreement limited the Ottoman presence in Europe to territory east of a straight line drawn from Enez (Enos) on the Aegean Sea to Midye (Midia) on the Black Sea.

Meanwhile, tensions were rising among the Balkan allies. The failure of the Serbs to retain northern Albania increased their determination to hold Macedonia in the face of growing Bulgarian opposition. The Bulgarians and Greeks never reached an agreement for the disposition of conquered Ottoman territories. Their forces soon began skirmishing in northern Macedonia. By 5 May 1913, the Greeks and Serbs, recognizing they had similar interest, had concluded an alliance directed against Bulgaria. To complicate the situation, the Romanians, who wanted compensation for any Bulgarian gains in the war, began to make demands on Bulgarian (southern) Dobrudzha (Dobrudja). A Great Powers Ambassadors' Conference in St. Petersburg in April 1913 failed to resolve the issue to the satisfaction of either the Bulgarians or the Romanians. The conclusion of the London treaty on 30 May enabled the Bulgarians to transfer the bulk of their army from the Chataldzha lines to the southwestern part of their country in order to enforce their claims to Macedonia. Before the Russians could act upon their promise to mediate in the dispute, an explosion occurred.

On the night of 29 June 1913, Bulgarian troops attacked Greek and Serbian positions in South Eastern Macedonia. This began the Second Balkan War, also known as the Interallied War. Greek and Serbian counterattacks drove the Bulgarians back. By early July, however, the Bulgarian army had largely contained the Greek and Serbian advance along the line of the former Bulgarian frontier. At this point, the Ottomans and the Romanians intervened against Bulgaria. The Romanians wanted all of Bulgarian Dobrudzha. The Ottomans sought to regain Adrianople, which they had lost earlier that year. The Romanians invaded Bulgaria on 10 July; the Ottomans two days later. The Bulgarian army, committed along the southwestern Bulgarian border against the Greeks and Serbs, could not oppose either action. With no help forthcoming from any quarter, the Bulgarians had to seek terms. Negotiations with the Greeks, Romanians and Serbs resulted in the Treaty of Bucharest of 10 August 1913. Here Bulgaria acknowledged the loss of most of Macedonia as well as southern Dobrudzha. A separate treaty signed in Constantinople on 30 September 1913 confirmed the loss of Adrianople and eastern Thrace to the Ottomans. Bulgaria, the main victor of the First Balkan War, became the victim of the Second Balkan War.

The two Balkan Wars resulted in significant changes on the map of South Eastern Europe. A fragile Albania emerged, challenged by Greek and Serbian territorial claims and protected by Austria-Hungary and Italy. Bulgaria, despite its defeat in the Second Balkan War and the loss of Macedonia, gained territory all along its southern frontier, including an outlet to the Aegean with the port of Dedeagach (Alexandroupolis). Greatly disappointed by Russia's failure to save them from defeat, the Bulgarians turned away from Russia and increasingly to the Triple Alliance. Greece obtained clear title to Crete, Epirus, much of southern Macedonia including the important city of Salonika, and the islands of Chios, Limnos and Mitylene. The Greeks remained without an overt Great Power sponsor. Montenegro received half of the Sandjak of Novi Pazar but was denied Scutari. Romania took southern Dobrudzha. The Romanians began to waver between the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente. Serbia got Kosovo, the largest portion of Macedonia, and half of the Sanjak of Novi Pazar. Serbia, the great victor of the Balkan Wars, was now Russia's only reliable Balkan connection. The Serbs were determined to take advantage of this situation. Even though exhausted by their efforts during the Balkan Wars, the Serbs understood that they had Russian protection. They had realized their objectives against the Ottoman Empire and against Bulgaria. They then turned to their Austro-Hungarian antagonist in order to unite with the Serbs of Bosnia.

The Great Powers made some effort to establish the new Albanian state on a firm footing through an International Control Commission. The Commission set up a police force directed by Dutch officers and invited a Prussian officer to be the new country's first prince: Prince [Wilhelm of Wied \(1876-1945\)](#). Albania at this point still lacked a viable political infrastructure and clearly defined borders.

Serbian successes in the Balkan Wars remained incomplete after the treaty of Bucharest. The Belgrade government still aspired to unite with Serbian populations in Bosnia, Croatia and Dalmatia. Success in the Balkan Wars also encouraged the Serbs to pursue their goals in northern Albania. Despite Austro-Hungarian objections, they continued to seek access to the Adriatic Sea. To this end, the Serbian government maintained forces in northern Albania. These had never entirely evacuated northern Albania after the autumn of 1912. Their presence resulted in an Austro-Hungarian ultimatum on 18 October 1913 demanding the withdrawal of all Serbian forces from northern Albania.^[2] For the third time in one year, the Austrians had threatened war over a Balkan issue. The Serbs indicated a formal acquiescence. Nevertheless, Serbian regular and irregular forces remained in northern Albania. With their army depleted from its efforts during the Balkan War, the Serbs sought assistance from Russia. During a visit of Crown Prince [Alexander Karadjordjević \(1888-1934\)](#) and Prime Minister [Nikola Pašić \(1845-1926\)](#) to St. Petersburg on 2 February 1914, Russian Tsar Nicholas II assured them, "We will do everything for Serbia."^[3] The Russians supported their final position in South Eastern Europe. This heartened the Serbs.

The end of the Balkan Wars did not mean an end to the fighting in the Balkans. Albanians in Kosovo resisted the Serbian occupation. Serbian troops skirmished with Albanian irregulars in northern Albania. On 18 October the Austro-Hungarians delivered an ultimatum in Belgrade demanding that the Serbs withdrawal from Albania. Although the Serbs agreed to remove their forces from Albania, some stayed there to enforce Serbian claims to the region and to assist in the suppression of the Kosovo insurgency. For the third time in a year, the Serbs antagonized Austria-Hungary. Greek irregulars also maintained a presence in southern Albania throughout 1913-1914.

The First World War

The event that ignited the Austro-Serb conflict was not another dispute over Albanian frontiers. On the Serbian national holiday, St. Vitus' Day (*Vidovdan*), 28 June 1914, the 525th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, a Bosnian Serb teenager, [Gavrilo Princip \(1894-1918\)](#) assassinated the Austrian heir [Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este \(1863-1914\)](#) and his wife [Sophia, Archduchess of Austria \(1868-1914\)](#) on the streets of Sarajevo. A cabal of officers in the Serbian army, led by Colonel [Dragutin Dimitrijević \(1876-1917\)](#), known as "Apis", abetted the actions of Princip and his cohorts. The Austro-Hungarians quickly uncovered this connection, and decided to utilize it to resolve their ongoing problems with their southern neighbor. They declared war on 28 July, one month after the assassination. The European alliance systems quickly engaged, with France, Great Britain and Russia joining the Serbs, and Germany supporting Austria-Hungary. Montenegro joined the Serbs. Montenegro's lack of success in the Balkan Wars had forced King Nikola to more or less subordinate his realm to his larger Serbian neighbor. Bulgaria, Greece and Romania affirmed their [neutrality](#).

The Serbs, led by the indomitable Vojvoda [Radomir Putnik \(1847-1917\)](#), turned back the first Austro-Hungarian invasion at the battle of Cer Mountain 16-25 August. A second Austro-Hungarian attempt later that autumn also failed. They did succeed in occupying Belgrade on 2 December 1914. A determined Serbian counterattack ejected them for the third time from Serbian territory by 15 December.^[4] These Serbian victories were among the few Entente successes of 1914. They stoked the Serbian government hopes to gain significant Austro-Hungarian territories after the war, including Bosnia, Dalmatia and Vojvodina.

Nevertheless, the overall situation in Serbia remained perilous. The Serbian army lacked sufficient ammunition and other military supplies. Cholera and Typhus ravaged the civilian and military populations. The entire country was exhausted. Serbia's British and French allies decided to send support. The only viable access to Serbia was through the Greek port of Salonika and up the Vardar River corridor. Greek Prime Minister Venizelos favored the Entente. He invited the Entente forces to use the port on 3 October 1915. He resigned however on 5 October. A neutralist government then assumed power. The British and French troops began landing in Salonika on that same day either as invited guests or as violators of Greek neutrality.

At this point the position of Bulgaria became critical. After the outbreak of the war, both sides recognized the importance of Bulgaria and sought its adherence to their efforts. For the Central Powers, Bulgaria would insure communication with the Ottoman Empire and the destruction of Serbia. For the Entente, the adherence of Bulgaria would greatly facilitate an attack on

Constantinople and would support Serbia. Bulgaria was prepared to intervene on whichever side could guarantee the attainment of Bulgaria's nationalist objectives in Macedonia. The [Gallipoli campaign](#) made Bulgaria particularly attractive to the Entente. Because the Serbs were unwilling to concede Macedonia, their prize from the Balkan Wars, the Entente could not meet the Bulgarian demand. For the Entente, Serbia was the ally whose distress had been a cause for the outbreak of the war. At best, the Entente could offer Bulgaria a part of Macedonia after the war when Serbia had presumably obtained Bosnia. The Central Powers had no such inhibitions. Bulgaria could have Macedonia immediately. Given the apparent Entente failure at Gallipoli and the German victories in [Poland](#) at Gorlice-Tarnow, the choice appeared obvious to the government in Sofia. Bulgaria could have a part of Macedonia at the end of the war, or all of it immediately. On 6 September 1915, Bulgaria joined the Central Powers. Several days earlier, on 3 September, in an agreement between Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire, the Ottomans ceded the lower Maritza valley to Bulgaria. This gave the Bulgarians control of the railroad line from Bulgaria to their newly acquired Aegean port at Dedeagach.

A Central Powers' attack on Serbia from two sides began the next month. One Austro-Hungarian army and one German army crossed the Danube in the north on 6 October. Two Bulgarian armies attacked Serbia from the east one week later. The Serbs were soon overwhelmed. They attempted to stand and fight in the old Kosovo battlefield, but could not maintain their positions in the face of the determined Bulgarian attack. Cut off by the Bulgarians from a retreat to the south, the remnants of the Serbian forces withdrew in winter conditions during November and December 1915 to the southwest, across the Albanian mountains to the Adriatic Sea. Eventually they found refuge on the Greek island of Corfu. Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian troops occupied Serbia. Both occupying powers imposed a harsh regime on the Serbian civilian population.^[5] In 1917, Bulgarian troops brutally suppressed a Serbian revolt in Toplica.

Entente troops began landing on 7 October in neutral Greece at the port of Salonika. They intended to move north up the Vardar River valley to aid the beleaguered Serbs. A French column advanced along the left shore of the Vardar while a mixed British and French column advanced along the right shore. Both columns crossed the Greek frontier into Serbian Macedonia. There, beginning on 3 December, the Bulgarians halted both columns in a series of sharp engagements and forced them back across the Greek frontier.

At German insistence, the Bulgarians stopped their pursuit of the British and French at the Greek frontier. The Bulgarian halt at the Greek frontier allowed the Entente to augment its forces with additional British and French troops as well as contingents from the French colonies (Malagasy, Senegalese and Vietnamese), Italy and Russia. After some rest and refurbishment on the island of Corfu, the survivors of the Serbian retreat joined the Salonika armies. The Central Powers deployed men from all four members. The appearance of Ottoman troops on the eastern end of the Macedonian Front made the Bulgarians very uncomfortable. The variety of contingents on both sides of the front made the Macedonian Front the most diverse of the entire war. Not surprisingly they also caused command difficulties on both sides. The Macedonian Front developed in the pattern established on the Western Front. This front expanded from the Adriatic Sea to the Aegean. Both sides fortified their positions along the Greek frontier, and sought advantage in air raids and small ground attacks.

The Montenegrin army helped to cover the Serbian retreat. Without the Serbs, however, the Montenegrins were vulnerable. Early in 1916 the Austrians launched an invasion of the smallest Balkan country. Cetinje fell on 11 January 1916 and Montenegro formally surrendered on 17 January, becoming the first country to leave the war. King Nikola went into exile from which he never returned. Austro-Hungarian troops occupied the country.

The fragile young Albanian state collapsed soon after the beginning of the war. Lacking support anywhere in the country, the Great Power appointed Prince Wilhelm of Wied returned to Germany in September 1914. No viable Albanian government replaced him until after the war. The attempt of the former Ottoman officer of Albanian origin, [Essad Pasha Toptani \(1863-1920\)](#), to establish a government never gained much credibility beyond the town of Durrës.^[6] In the spring of 1915, Italian troops and some French units occupied the south. After the defeat of Serbia, Austrian soldiers confronted Italian troops along a line from Lake Prespa to the Adriatic Sea south of Vlorë. Both sides armed bands of Albanians. Irregular warfare ensued all along the front for the remainder of the war. The Austro-Hungarians, French, and Italians all established military administrations over parts of the country.

By the summer of 1916, Romania, which like Bulgaria had wavered between both sides since the beginning of the war, appeared ready to join the Entente. Like the Bulgarians, the Romanians wanted to realize nationalist goals. Unlike Bulgaria, these goals were divided between the belligerents. Austria-Hungary possessed Transylvania and Bukovina, long coveted by

Romanian nationalists. Russia ruled Bessarabia, obtained from Romania in 1878. Romania maintained a formal alliance with Austria-Hungary from 1882 until 1914. This arrangement connected Romania to the Triple Alliance. In the summer of 1916, the apparent success of the Brusilov offensive tilted Bucharest in favor of the Entente. As the Romanians made final preparations to enter the war, the Entente readied an offensive along the Macedonian Front to divert and distract the Central Powers from Romania, which lay exposed between Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria. The Bulgarians attempted to preempt the Entente offensive on the Macedonian Front by launching one of their own. The pending threat from Romania persuaded the Germans to lift their ban on a Bulgarian attack into Greece. This effort involved attacks on the eastern and western wings of the front. In the east, Bulgarian troops advanced into Greek held eastern Macedonia. Against little Greek resistance they occupied Drama, Serres and the Aegean port of Kavala. In the west, they seized Florina (Lerin). The Entente countered this effort and through the autumn of 1916 drove the Bulgarians out of Florina north into Macedonia as far as Monastir.

Romania finally entered the war on the side of the Entente on 27 August and invaded Transylvania, the main Romanian objective in the war. The Romanians soon found themselves in a two-front war. A Bulgarian Army, augmented by German and Ottoman troops but under German command, crossed the Romanian frontier in Dobruzha in conjunction with an Austro-Hungarian and German counterattack against Romania. The Bulgarians advanced quickly against determined Romanian opposition. By December, they had defeated a Romanian attempt to cross the Danube to invade Bulgaria, and had overrun the entire region of Dobruzha. On 6 December the Austro-German force occupied Bucharest. The Romanians held on in Moldavia through 1917. They won important mainly defensive victories at Mărăști and Mărășești in July and August respectively of 1917, but at a heavy cost in Romanian lives.^[7] These successes prevented the total occupation of the country for the time being. The collapse of Russia through most of 1917 and the subsequent treaty of Brest-Litovsk of 3 March 1918 left the Romanians isolated and forced them to come to terms with the Central Powers. Romania signed the Treaty of Bucharest on 7 May 1918, yielding Dobruzha, territories all along the Carpathian border with Austria-Hungary, and important economic concessions to the Central Powers.

During 1916 and 1917 Greece was a divided country. Supporters of Venizelos advocated entering the war on the side of the Entente, whose forces were by then ensconced in the north of the country. Supporters of [Constantine I, King of Greece \(1868-1923\)](#), who was himself of Danish origin and married to [Sophia of Prussia \(1870-1932\)](#) the sister of [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#), inclined towards the Central Powers. Given the presence of a significant Entente force in northern Greece, he was in no position to join the Central Powers. He therefore favored neutrality for Greece, as did important elements in the army. This dichotomy in the Greek reaction to the war resulted in the so called "National Schism." On 30 August 1916 a group of pro-Venizelos army officers seized power in Salonika and established a pro-Entente government there in opposition to the neutralist government in Athens. Meanwhile the Entente imposed a blockade on the Athens government. After almost a year, Entente pressure finally forced King Constantine to abdicate in favor of his son [Alexander, King of Greece \(1893-1920\)](#) on 12 June 1917. Alexander appointed Venizelos prime minister, and Greece declared war on the Central Powers on 27 June 1917. Greek army units then joined the Entente forces at the Macedonian Front. They replaced the Russian soldiers, whom revolutionary agitation rendered useless for military operations.

By 1917, the Serbian position in the Balkans was in peril. The Serbian government struggled to maintain their forces on the Macedonian Front. It controlled only a tiny area of Serbian territory around Monastir. Serbia's Russian patron had collapsed in revolution and disarray. Internal discord led to the trial and execution of Colonel Dimitrijević. The acquisition of Habsburg territories seemed to be beyond the government's reach. Meanwhile some South Slavic elements within and outside the Habsburg Empire began to doubt the continued existence of that state. Already at the beginning of the war mainly Croats from Dalmatia and Bosnia had formed a Yugoslav Committee which settled in London and maintained contacts with émigré populations in the United States and elsewhere. The committee intended to represent the interests of Habsburg South Slavs to the Entente, whatever the outcome of the battlefield. The Yugoslav Committee learned the terms of the Treaty of London of 1915, in which the Entente powers promised extensive Habsburg territories containing Croat, Serb and Slovene populations to Italy. These mutual problems provided an incentive for cooperation between the Serbian government and the Yugoslav Committee. The result of the mutual weakness of the Serbs and the Habsburg South Slavs was the Treaty of Corfu of 20 July 1917.^[8] Serbian Prime Minister Pašić and [Ante Trumbić \(1864-1938\)](#), a representative for the Yugoslav Committee, signed the treaty. It called for a democratic South Slav state with equality of alphabets and religions, under the rule of the Serbian Karadjordjevic dynasty. The Corfu arrangement took no notice of Montenegro.

Meanwhile, material conditions within Bulgaria deteriorated. As the Germans prepared for their [Western Front](#) offensive, they

began to shift their forces away from Macedonia during the fall of 1917. By April 1918, few German troops remained there. Another issue was the lack of a material basis on which to continue the war. By the beginning of 1918, most German supplies ceased to be available to the Bulgarian army. Food was a major problem. Hunger appeared in Bulgarian villages and towns and spread throughout the front lines. There was also a great lack of adequate military clothing. Some soldiers went into battle barefoot and in rags. Morale in the Bulgarian army plummeted.

Disputes with its allies also undermined Bulgarian morale. The Bulgarians squabbled with the Austro-Hungarians over the border between Albania and Macedonia. They resented efforts of the Austro-Hungarians and Germans to share in the material and territorial booty of Dobrudzha. Most seriously, they abhorred the Ottoman demand for the return of the Maritza valley in Thrace that had been ceded in 1915.

In June 1918, the aggressive General [Louis Franchet d'Espèrey \(1856-1942\)](#) assumed command of the Entente forces. The Entente was eager to divert Central Powers resources from the Western Front while the critical battle raged there. Also a breakthrough the Macedonian Front offered a way through the Central Powers' back door into Austria-Hungary and possibly southern Germany, as well as to Constantinople. Entente attacks on Bulgarian positions along the Balkan Front correspondingly increased during the summer of 1918. The Bulgarians suffered a serious reverse at the beginning of June 1918 when the Greek army together with some French units attacked the fortified ridge at Yerbichna (Skra di Legen) located between the Vardar River and Dobro Pole. By this time Bulgarian morale had deteriorated to such an extent that Bulgarian commanders could not contemplate a counterattack. A report to Tsar Ferdinand stated, "There were numerous cases of going over to the enemy, of desertion to the rear, self-inflicted wounds and numerous expressed indications that the infantry would not attack."^[9] The battle of Yerbichna demonstrated that the morale of the Bulgarian army had declined to a degree that undermined its defensive capabilities.

The decisive event in the First World War fighting in South Eastern Europe was the Battle of Dobro Pole. The Bulgarians had begun to prepare defensive positions on this ridge at the end of the fighting of 1916. These included two main trench lines, [barbed wire](#) and [artillery](#) positions to the rear. The idea for an attack on the Bulgarian defenses at Dobro Pole seems to have originated in the Serbian army in 1916.^[10] A Serbian Staff officer realized that if the Entente forces could break through the Bulgarian positions there, they would encounter relatively flat land, the "Good Field" of the name. From there they could reach the Vardar River valley and move on up to Skoplje and into Serbia. By the summer of 1918 the attack looked increasingly attractive. Bulgarian morale was low. At the same time, the Germans were in retreat on the Western Front, and therefore unlikely to provide much help. A breakthrough at Dobro Pole tantalized the Entente command with the possibility of achieving a decisive victory with a single operation. By the end of the summer of 1918 the Entente had amassed enough equipment and manpower in front of Dobro Pole to have a clear superiority over the Bulgarian defenders.^[11] They were aware of the morale problems in the Bulgarian ranks. A French report dated 15 September 1918 noted "the Bulgarian people and army are overcome with a desire for peace, which is increased by a determined hatred of the Germans and Turks."^[12] This seemed to auger well for the Entente offensive.

On 14 September, French and Serbian forces launched a massive assault on Bulgarian defenses at Dobro Pole in the center of the Macedonian Front in northern Greece.^[13] After the second day of heavy fighting, the Bulgarian soldiers began to fall back in disarray. Some troops retreated towards Bulgaria forming angry mobs, and seeking redress for the suffering they had endured at the front. French and Serbian troops surged north into Macedonia. Even so, at this late date, other Bulgarian units were still able to defeat a British-Greek attack at Lake Doiran.

Despite the defensive success at Doiran, Bulgarian forces at the front to the east and west of Dobro Pole had to withdraw to avoid being cut off. Discipline continued to deteriorate. Almost six years of fighting, lack of food and clothing, and concerns about their families at home caused many Bulgarian soldiers to reject frantic attempts by Bulgarian officers to impose discipline. Disorganized mobs of Bulgarian soldiers moved north, determined to punish those in the capital they regarded as responsible for all the suffering. This effort became known as the Radomir Rebellion, after the small town in western Bulgaria at the center of the disorders. The soldiers came under the influence of peasant revolutionary leaders from the Agrarian Party such as [Aleksandŭr Stamboliyski \(1879-1923\)](#). On 27 September the leaders of the revolt proclaimed a republic at Radomir with Stamboliyski as prime minister. The Austro-Hungarians and Germans could promise only that six divisions were on the way from the Crimea and Italy.

Threatened by revolution and lacking meaningful help from the Central Powers, the Bulgarian government decided on 25 September to seek an armistice. The Bulgarian delegation signed an armistice agreement with the Entente on 29 September in Salonika. Bulgaria became the first of the Central Powers to leave the war. Montenegro and Romania as well as Russia had preceded Bulgaria in leaving the war. While Entente military strength was superior to that of the Bulgarians, the years of bad food, shoddy material, and uncertain relations with their allies proved to be weapons as effective as Serbian infantry and French artillery in the defeat of September 1918.

When the Austro-Hungarian and German troops arrived in Bulgaria, they participated in the suppression of the army mutineers. At a battle near Pernik outside Sofia on 30 September, Bulgarian military cadets, German troops and some IMRO forces turned the mutineers back. Afterwards, they scattered, their goal of ending the war achieved. Shortly afterwards, on 3 October, Ferdinand I of Bulgaria abdicated. His twenty-four-year-old son assumed the Bulgarian throne as Boris III, Tsar of Bulgaria (1894-1943).

As Austro-Hungarian and German units retreated to the north, victorious Serbian soldiers moved through Macedonia and on into Serbia. They reached Niš on 10 October and Belgrade on 31 October. In Belgrade on 1 December 1918, the Serbs proclaimed the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Yugoslavia after 1929). Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian occupation had lasted three years. The Serbian army continued on over the Danube and had moved into southern Hungary to enforce Serbian claims to the Vojvodina by the time the war ended. The Austro-Hungarians evacuated Albania and Montenegro only at the end of October. They finally left Cetinje on 6 November. By this time Habsburg authority had collapsed everywhere. Serbian troops filled the power vacuum in Croatia and Slovenia, drawn by a need to expel the Hungarians and thwart Italian expansionism.

Even though defeated by the Central Powers, Romania made some territorial gains. As early as January 1918 Romanian troops intervened in the chaotic situation that existed across the Prut River in Bessarabia as a result of the Russian revolutions. On 9 April 1918, just as Romania was forced to concede defeat to the Central Powers in the Treaty of Bucharest of 1918, the Bessarabian National Council (Sfatul Țării), voted to unify with Romania.^[14] With the defeat of the Central Powers obvious, the Romanians reentered the war on 10 November on the side of the Entente. This ensured that they would be among the victors of the war.

Consequences

The settlement of the First World War in South Eastern Europe was less successful than the Berlin settlement of 1878. Out of the [Treaty of Neuilly](#) of 27 November 1919 with Bulgaria, the [Treaty of Saint-Germain](#) of 10 September 1919 with Austria and the [Treaty of Trianon](#) of 22 March 1919 with Hungary were established a greater Romania and a Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Romania obtained Austrian Bukovina, Hungarian Transylvania and part of the Banat, and Russian Bessarabia. Despite being the two great victors of the First World War in the Balkans, neither Romania nor Yugoslavia enjoyed great economic or political success in the war's aftermath. Greece, buoyed by joining the winning side in the war, soon embarked upon an Anatolian adventure that ended in disaster and the end of the Megali Idea. Bulgaria, once again shorn of Macedonia, entered a period of political instability. Albania triumphed simply by maintaining its precarious independence against Greek, Italian and Yugoslav pretensions. Montenegro vanished within the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

The Balkan Wars and the First World War in this region must be understood not as separate events but as a continuity. Fighting in South Eastern Europe began in October 1912 and persisted until November 1918. By any reckoning this prolonged war was disastrous for the Balkan states in men and material. This fighting had spared no place in the Balkans. Romania and Serbia in particular had experienced heavy combat on their own territories. Soldiers died in large numbers. In the Balkan Wars, Bulgaria suffered as many as 66,000 dead, Greece around 8,000 dead, Montenegro 3,000 dead and Serbia about 37,000 dead.^[15] In the fighting from 1914 to 1918 Bulgaria suffered 101,224 dead, Greece 28,000 dead, Montenegro 3,000 dead, Romania 335,706 dead and Serbia 127,535 dead.^[16] In the fighting after 1914 alone Serbia lost more than one third of its army, Romania one quarter and Bulgaria one fifth.^[17] Altogether, as many as 710,000 Balkan soldiers died in the fighting from 1912 to 1918. The wounded were of course even more numerous. Civilians perished throughout the Balkans from being caught up in the fighting, from privations in food, fuel and other materials caused by the fighting as well as by epidemic disease which raged throughout the region. The war displaced hundreds of thousands throughout the Balkans.

Most of the foreign soldiers left the Balkans after the fighting ended in 1918. The victors briefly maintained small numbers of

troops in defeated Bulgaria. Some Greek, Italian and Serbian (Yugoslav) units remained in Albania until 1920. Sporadic resistance against Serbian control continued in Kosovo. Amidst the debris of war, some hopes existed in and outside of the region, that within the peace based on Wilsonian idealism, the economic and political potential of the Balkans could achieve full realization. These hopes soon evaporated in the heat of nationalist expectations that were renewed either by the exhilaration of victory or the disappointment of defeat. The Italian occupation of Albania in April 1939 returned war to the region it had vacated only twenty years before.

Richard C. Hall, Georgia Southwestern State University

Section Editors: [Michael Neiberg](#); [Sophie De Schaepdrijver](#)

Notes

1. ↑ Gerolymatos, André: *The Balkan Wars, Conquest Revolution and Retribution from the Ottoman Era to the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, New York 2002, p. 207.
2. ↑ Bittner, Ludwig et al (eds): *Österreich-Ungarns Aussenpolitik von der Bosnischen Krise 1908 zum Kriegsausbruch 1914. Diplomatische Aktenstücke des Österreichisch-Ungarischen Ministerium des Äussern*, Vienna 1930, VII, numbers 8850, 8878, 8880. One historian pointed out that the political situation in the summer of 1914 essentially duplicated that of the autumn of 1913: Helmreich, E. C.: *The Diplomacy of the Balkan Wars 1912-1913*, Cambridge, 1938, p. 426.
3. ↑ Pashich, Nikola: *Pasicheva audijentsija kod Tsara Nikola II [Pašić's Audience with Tsar Nikolas II]*: in Nikola P. Pashich (Belgrade 1937), p. 188.
4. ↑ Mitrović, Andrej: *Serbia's Great War 1914-1918*, West Lafayette 2007, pp. 70-72.
5. ↑ Scheer, Tamara: *Zwischen Front und Heimat, Österreich-Ungarns Militärverwaltungen im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Frankfurt am Main 2009, pp. 30-34.
6. ↑ Vickers, Miranda: *The Albanians: a Modern History*, London 1995, p. 87.
7. ↑ Torrey, Glenn E.: *The Romanian Battlefield in World War I*, Lawrence 2011, pp. 210-236.
8. ↑ Dragnich, Alex N.: *Serbia, Nikola Pašić and Yugoslavia*, New Brunswick 1974, pp. 116-117.
9. ↑ *Archive of Tsar Ferdinand of Bulgaria*, Hoover Institute, Stanford 1918, pp. 74-76, Incoming, Report from Army Group Scholtz to O.H.L., 19 June 1918.
10. ↑ *Archive of Mladen J. Zujovic*, Hoover Institute, Stanford California, folders 1-2, General Zivko Pavlovic i proboj Solunskog fronta [General Zivko Pavlović and the Breakthrough at the Salonika Front], pp. 1-10.
11. ↑ Hall, Richard C.: *Balkan Breakthrough, The Battle of Dobro Pole 1918*, Bloomington 2010, p. 134.
12. ↑ *Ministère de Guerre, État-Major de L'Armée-Service historique, Les Armées françaises dans la Grande Guerre*, Paris 1933-36, VIII 3, 2, number 971. Note sur la situation en Macédoine, 15 September 1918, p. 700.
13. ↑ Hall, *Balkan Breakthrough* 2010, pp. 135-145.
14. ↑ Torrey, *Romanian Battlefield* 2011, pp. 280-281.
15. ↑ Hall, Richard C.: *The Balkan Wars, Prelude to the First World War*, London 2000, p. 135.
16. ↑ Tucker, Spencer C.(ed.): *The Encyclopedia of World War I*, Santa Barbara 2005, volume I, p. 273.
17. ↑ Sheehan, James J.: *Where have all the Soldiers Gone? The Transformation of Modern Europe*, Boston 2008, p. 100.

Selected Bibliography

Army History Directorate (Greece) (ed.): **[A concise history of the Balkan Wars, 1912-1913](#)**, Athens 1998: Hellenic Army General Staff, Army History Directorate.

Dieterich, Alfred: **[Weltkriegsende an der mazedonischen Front](#)**, Oldenburg 1925: G. Stalling.

Dragnich, Alex N.: **[Serbia, Nikola Pašić, and Yugoslavia](#)**, New Brunswick 1974: Rutgers University Press.

Erickson, Edward J.: **[Defeat in detail. The Ottoman army in the Balkans, 1912-1913](#)** Westport; London 2003: Praeger.

Falls, Cyril / Becke, Archibald F.: **[Military operations, Macedonia](#)**, volume 1-2, London 1933-1935: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

Gumz, Jonathan E.: **[The resurrection and collapse of empire in Habsburg Serbia, 1914-1918](#)** Cambridge; New York 2009: Cambridge University Press.

Hall, Richard C.: **[The Balkan Wars 1912-1913. Prelude to the First World War](#)** London; New York 2000: Routledge.

Hall, Richard C.: **[Balkan breakthrough. The Battle of Dobro Pole 1918](#)** Bloomington 2010: Indiana University Press.

Hellenic Army General Staff: **A concise history of the participation of the Hellenic army in the First World War 1914-1918**, Athens 1999: Hellenic Army General Staff Army History Directorate.

Helmreich, Ernst Christian: **The diplomacy of the Balkan wars, 1912-1913**, Cambridge; London 1938: Harvard University Press; H. Milford, Oxford University Press.

International Commission to Inquire into the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan Wars / Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Division of Intercourse and Education: **Report of the International Commission to Inquire into the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan War**, Washington, D.C. 1914: The Endowment.

Markov, Georgi: **Golyamata voyna i bŭlgarskiyat klyuch kŭm evropeyskiya pogreb 1914-1916 g. (The Great War and the Bulgarian key to the European powder keg 1914-1916)**, Sofia 1995.

Markov, Georgi: **Golyamata voyna i Bŭlgariata mezhdu Sredna Evropa i Orienta 1916-1919 g. (The Great War and Bulgaria between Central Europe and the East)**, Sofia 2006.

Mayerhofer, Lisa: **Zwischen Freund und Feind - Deutsche Besatzung in Rumänien 1916-1918** Munich 2010: Meidenbauer.

Mitrović, Andrej: **Serbia's Great War, 1914-1918**, West Lafayette 2007: Purdue University Press.

Nedev, Nedŭ, Goetzmann, Edouard Antoine (ed.): **Les opérations en Macédoine, l'épopée de Doiran, 1915-18**, Sofia 1927: Imprimerie Armeyski voeno-isdatelski fond.

Palmer, Alan: **The gardeners of Salonika**, New York 1965: Simon Schuster.

Rakočević, Novica: **Crna Gora u prvom svjetskom ratu 1914-1918 (Montenegro in the First World War 1914-1918)** Cetinje 1969: Istorijski Institut Titograd.

Strutz, Georg: **Herbstschlacht in Macedonien, Cernabogen 1916**, Schlachten des Weltkrieges, Oldenburg i.O. 1925: Stalling.

Torrey, Glenn E.: **The Romanian battlefield in World War I** Lawrence 2011: University Press of Kansas.

Citation

Hall, Richard C.: War in the Balkans , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.10163](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10163).

License

This text is licensed under: CC by-NC-ND 3.0 Germany - Attribution, Non-commercial, No Derivative Works.