

The Balkan Crisis

by Roland G. Usher

The great area of mountain, table-land, and river valley stretching from the Black and Aegean seas on the east, to the Adriatic on the west, and extending from the Mediterranean north to the crest of the Tyrolese and Transylvanian Alps, has long been loosely designated, from historical and political, rather than from geographical reasons, by the single name, the Balkans; literally, the mountain gaps. It includes the present independent states, Rumania, Bulgaria, Servia, and Montenegro, the Balkans par excellence, with which belong, geographically or racially, Greece, European Turkey, and the Austrian provinces of Dalmatia, Croatia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina.

A greater variety of people is scarcely to be found in Europe. The Slavs are racially in the majority; the orthodox Greek Christians outnumber the numerous other creeds; and the vast bulk of the superficial area is thinly sprinkled with mountaineers, superb in physique, dense in their ignorance of the rudiments of education, fierce in their opposition to the pressure of orderly, centralized administration. The heterogeneous population is descended from the remnants of the vast disorderly hordes which poured into Europe from Asia Minor and the Steppes of Russia, between the third and the sixteenth centuries: fragments of the tribes conquered by the Huns and the Goths during their devastating passage; sections of the invaders too weak to keep up with the main body; people driven out of the Byzantine Empire by the Ottoman invasions; fragments of the advance-guard of various expeditions who outstripped the main body and then, upon its retreat, were left behind. In development and intelligence, the people include such extremes as the scarcely civilized hillmen of Montenegro; the stolid, inert Bulgarian peasantry; and the alert, capable, cultivated citizens of Sofia and Athens. An American correspondent tells of a bootblack who introduced him to his uncle, the Prime Minister of Bulgaria, and adds that neither uncle nor nephew seemed aware of any difference in social status. By grazing, and by a rude agriculture, these diverse peoples supported themselves for centuries and, in the main, still do so. Poverty-stricken (until lately), individually and collectively, isolated (until lately) from the world and from each other by the difficulties of communication, they became inevitably narrow, bigoted, fiercely partisan, unprogressive, certainly in no way fitted to influence the affairs of Europe.

Yet, as certainly, since the days of imperial Rome, no European state has been more often the subject of anxious inquiry; for those mountain valleys are the keys of Europe. Here where nature has built her fortresses, East has met West, the invaded has met the invader. In these great defiles are the natural roads between Asia and central and western Europe, long since trodden hard by Roman and Barbarian, Crusader and Infidel, Hapsburg and Ottoman. The Balkans control the whole lower half of the rich Danube Valley, whose economic value is as patent to-day as it was to the numerous invaders of Europe who recruited their strength in its fair fields. The Balkans also control the western coast of the Black Sea and some of its finest natural harbors. Along this coast runs the road from

Russia to Constantinople; down through the Danube Valley, across the mountains, and through Adrianople, runs the great highway from the Rhine and Danube valleys to Constantinople and the East; around to the West, through Albania and Dalmatia, is the perfectly practical road, used long ago by the Visigoths, connecting Constantinople with Trieste, Venice, and the Valley of the Po. The Balkans, in fact, control Constantinople, the only gateway between Europe and Asia Minor, the junction of trade routes and military roads thousands of years old.

The Balkans have always been buffer states. Augustus there erected his barriers against the barbarian hordes; there Alaric and his horsemen broke the Roman legionaries at Adrianople, and from the mountain fastnesses assailed the Western Empire; there the Byzantine Empire made its last long stand; and there, after the fall of Constantinople, Christian Europe held the advancing Turks at bay. With the decline of the Ottoman power and the strengthening of the Hapsburg power, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the danger of the Mohammedan conquest of Christendom passed, and the Balkans lost significance for a while in the eyes of Europe. But to the Balkans themselves, the continued pressure of the Turk was not merely a menace: it was a curse; their sufferings were rendered a thousandfold keener by the knowledge that their oppressor was an infidel. The racial antipathy of the Occidental for the Oriental, the fierce religious hatred of the Christian for the Mohammedan, are motives actuating the Balkan peoples to a degree inconceivable in America; and no less violently do they control the children of the men who battered the gates of Vienna and beached their galleys on the shores of Rhodes and Malta. This war is a gigantic blood feud, a racial struggle, a crusade. The skirmishes have been hand-to-hand fights, and, even in pitched battles, Bulgarian regiments have thrown away their guns and rushed upon the Turks, knife in hand, in a frenzied lust for blood. The outrages upon the Macedonian Christians, which were the ostensible cause of the war, only intensified this fanatical antipathy, handed down from father to son. There can be no doubt that to the soldiers themselves the fierce desire to flesh their steel in an enemy's body outweighs every other motive.

If the strategic position of the Balkans has been a curse, by involving them in the meshes of the struggle between Europe and Asia, it has also proved a blessing, for, undoubtedly, they owe to outside pressure such nominal political unity as they have individually possessed. In fact, the existence of a common oppressor, the inevitability of military rule, and its equally inevitable abuses, have given these varied peoples, widely sundered by race and creed, the vigorous bond of a common hatred. The virulence of that hatred has rendered their mutual animosities and jealousies powerless to separate them.

Their strategic situation has also involved them deeply in the dynastic and international ambitions and rivalries of Europe. From the international point of view, the entire present war, from its causes and its battles to the treaty of peace, is but a single battle in the great war between rival coalitions for the domination of Europe and the control of the known world. 'The agony of European Turkey has begun,' said one of the keenest and best informed German editors in a recent interview, 'and the question whether the Balkans politically and economically shall belong to an alliance or confederation of states under Russian influence and dependency, or remain open to Germanic expansion, will be as a

matter of life or death to Germanic growth, influence, and life, and be finally answered and decided by the sword.' That is the real meaning of the Balkan crisis.

This phase of the Balkan question is the result of the internal development, and ambition for further expansion, of Russia, Austria, and Prussia. The objective of all three has long been a substantial share of the trade with the East which England has pretty thoroughly monopolized. In the supremacy of the English navy, and in the resulting control of the Atlantic and Mediterranean, they have seen the secret of her success and wealth. She grew rich, as Venice and Genoa had grown rich in the Middle Ages, carrying the eastern goods between the termini of the caravan routes and northern Europe. She then dug, with French assistance, the Suez Canal, creating a new water-route to India; she fortified it by a great fleet, by the possession of Egypt and the strategic points of the Mediterranean became an indispensable prerequisite to the control of this trade, and could not even be attempted by Austria or Russia without ports and battleships.

Access to the Mediterranean became, therefore, the cardinal feature of the policy of expansion, which both long since initiated, and neither could reach the sea save through the Balkans. Russia must possess at least the Black Sea, Constantinople, and the Straits; Austria needed at least the strip of land through which ran the road to Trieste and Venice, and, to protect that, must hold Servia, Montenegro, and Albania. The interests of Russia and Austria were, however, highly antagonistic. Constantinople, Adrianople, and the Danube Valley made the gateway to Vienna through which the Turk had so often marched, and Austria could not permit it to fall into the hands of her eastern rival. On the other hand, Russia could not allow the western Balkans to fall into Austria's hands for fear that empire might secure the eastern Balkans as well, or, at least, attack Russia on the flank on her own march to Constantinople. Nor did either power wish to divide the eastern Mediterranean with the other. Under such circumstances it was more than natural that the Balkan States conceived a terror of both, and vastly preferred subjection to the Turk to 'freedom' at the hands of such friends.

England and France, who already controlled the Mediterranean, were anxious to thwart both these plans at all costs, and were therefore eager to secure the Balkans and Constantinople themselves, a step to which Russia and Austria could not possibly consent. In fact, the Balkans and Turkey were such important districts that none of the great Powers could conceive of their possession by any one strong enough to use them for offense. They agreed, therefore, to keep the Turk alive so that he might hold what every one wanted, and what no one else could be allowed to have. Turkey's weakness was its only right to live. England and France, prevented by their distance from the scene of dispute from using the territory for their own aggrandizement, were allowed by the others to assume the direction of Turkey, and, in course of time, the present Balkan States were allowed to become independent of Turkey because their determination to Govern themselves could not be longer repressed without the existence of an army at the very place in all Europe where every one least wished for one. Ever since the liberation of the states, the Slavs and Greeks left under Turkish rule, have, with the aid of their independent neighbors, actively agitated the question of their own independence of Turkey, but this the Powers have always refused to grant, for fear that their loss might

weaken Turkey too much, or possibly add too substantially to the strength of one of the rival powers.

Then the whole situation was changed by the birth of the vast schemes dubbed, for want of a better name, Pan-Germanism. Bismarck had a vision of a Germano-Turkish state, extending from the North Sea to the Persian Gulf, and including in its federated bond Germany, Austria, Hungary, the Balkan States, and Turkey. Once this great alliance was perfected, what would not be possible? Persia, Egypt, Arabia were weak, and, once captured, the keys to the East would be in Germany's hands: India would fall, the British Empire become a thing of the past, and Germany, once more as in the Middle Ages, would be the empress of the world. With the control of the high road of commerce from Hamburg to Constantinople by rail, with the Baghdad Railroad to connect Constantinople with the Persian Gulf, the trade of the East could be brought to Europe by a more expeditious route than the sea route through Suez, and Germany and her allies would be able to break the English monopoly of Indian wares.

To Prussia and Austria, therefore, the Balkans are vital. To keep Russia out of Constantinople, to prevent her from securing a monopoly of the Black Sea, is absolutely essential to the execution of the Germanic plan, and cannot be insured without the firm control of both the Balkans and Constantinople. To contest England's naval supremacy in the Mediterranean, an Austrian naval base must be maintained in the Adriatic and, if possible, at Salonica in the Aegean; and in turn to defend such positions Austria must have control of the western Balkans, which flank not only the Adriatic, but her only road to both seas. To secure and protect a great trade route by rail from the Persian Gulf to Berlin and Hamburg, nearly one third of whose length lies in the defiles of the Balkans, effective possession of the eastern Balkans is indispensable. The success of Pan-Germanism depends entirely upon the feasibility of securing and maintaining complete control of the Balkans and of Turkey.

Conversely, the defense of Russia, England, and France depends upon the Balkans. Whoever else takes possession of them, the Triple Alliance must be kept out. There, too, is the best opportunity for placing a permanent obstacle in the way of the execution of the German plans. Strangely enough, the Tripolitan War was begun by Italy as an ally of England and France: she was to receive Tripoli as the price of leaving the Triple Alliance, of joining her fleet to the French fleet, and of thus placing the naval forces of Austria hopelessly in the minority in the Mediterranean. The failure of England and France 'peacefully' to deliver Tripoli, the necessity of waging an expensive war to obtain it, caused her to return to her old allies and to carry Tripoli with her. England, counting on Italy's assistance, had removed most of her Mediterranean fleet to the North Sea; the French fleet had not yet concentrated at Toulon; the Italian and Austrian fleets combined were too nearly the equal of the available French and English fleets, and the situation was elsewhere too dangerous for the latter to risk actual interference. Without resistance, the Triple Alliance secured undisputed control of the Adriatic, a naval base in Africa from which to threaten the steamship lines to Suez, a military base from which to assail either Egypt or Tunis, and the temporary possession of nearly every strategic point in the eastern Mediterranean save the Straits and Constantinople. In addition, they actually

landed in Tripoli a fully equipped army, and fortified the chief strategic points. The outbreak of the Balkan War then enabled them to extort from the unwilling Turks the peaceful cession of Tripoli, which Germany had pledged herself to obtain.

Needless to add, this result dealt England the heaviest blow she had received since 1798. It has been always said that Nelson's victory at Aboukir saved the English control of the Mediterranean. Had he lost the battle, the result could scarcely have been so disastrous as the passing of Tripoli into the undisputed control of the Triple Alliance. For the first time since the loss of Minorca in 1756, England, with her undisputed predominance unquestionably gone, was really in danger of losing actual control of the Mediterranean. Should Austria now succeed in executing any one of her schemes for the reconstruction of the Balkans, Bismarck's great vision would be within measurable distance of completion, the condition of England and France would be indeed desperate, and Russia's chances of realizing her ambitions in the south would surely have to be postponed at least half a century. For Austria plans to secure complete control of the Adriatic either, as she would like best, by annexing Servia, Montenegro, and Albania to her own territory, or by the formation of a Slav Monarchy out of those three states, the Croatia provinces, Bosnia, and Herzegovina, which would assume to Austria proper the same relation as Hungary and make of the Dual a Triple Monarchy. Macedonia, taking that territory in the broadest sense, would then be easily obtained; and from the great port of Salonica, as a base, the Austrian fleet would control the AEGean, and render the possession of Constantinople and the Straits of little value to Russia, should she perform the highly improbable feat of taking them after Austria had been thus strengthened.

These schemes and the recent events which seem to make their achievement possible have destroyed the conditions upon which the existence of Turkey depended; a power which even minor powers can defeat is no longer desired by England and France at Constantinople. The creation in its place of an independent confederation of Balkan states, hating Austria for racial and religious reasons, suspicious of Russia for political reasons, naturally bound to England and France by strong financial ties, is, from the point of view of England and France, the most favorable solution, and even from the point of view of Russia such an outcome would be a vast improvement on the past situation.

These same events have also removed the chief objection that England and France had to the possession of the Balkans and of Constantinople by Russia herself. If they must have a rival in the Black Sea, better a thousand times a rival whose navy has yet to be built, and whose imminent peril in northern Europe makes their aid as vital to her in the Baltic as hers is to them in the Balkans. Indeed, the mere possession of the Balkans by Russia would be a permanent guarantee of the failure of Bismarck's scheme, and would do more than any other one thing to render Morocco, India, and even England itself, safe from aggression. With Russia in Poland, in Galicia, and in Servia, Berlin and Vienna would be in deadly peril in flank and rear, Trieste could be taken, the Adriatic conquered, Italy isolated, Tripoli annexed by England and France, and a stronger hold secured on the Mediterranean and Africa than ever before. The key which might open the door of the East might also effectively lock it.

The Powers, therefore, permitted the Balkan States to destroy Turkey because they all hoped to benefit indirectly by the partition of the Turkish Empire. It is highly probable that the Balkan States were secretly assured of support by both coalitions, and well knew, therefore, that success in the war was a foregone conclusion. The moment, too, was opportune in the opinion of both coalitions. The Triple Alliance saw in it the first steps toward the ultimate consummation of their control of the Balkans, the lever by which Tripoli, Macedonia, and Albania could be pried from the clutches of the reluctant Turk, the surest method of obtaining more effective control of Asia Minor. Not only was there much to gain by action, but much might be lost by waiting till the English had altered their naval dispositions in the Mediterranean, till the Baghdad Railroad and the Persian Gulf had been outflanked by the Trans-Persian Railroad, till the opening of the Panama Canal had made the English possession of Suez relatively less essential, and, above all, till the death of Franz Joseph should produce such internal dissensions in Austria-Hungary as to render the Dual Monarchy helpless for a decade. The joy at the prospect of war was not less great in London, Paris, and St. Petersburg. The wished-for coup d'etat which should destroy the German plans was actually in progress in the creation of a confederation of really independent Balkan states. Should the Sultan actually be expelled from Europe, England could then offer him a refuge in Egypt, or, if he preferred to remain in Asia Minor, she might secure the establishment in Egypt or Morocco of a new Khalifate to rule the Mohammedans in Africa and Asia, and thus end for good and all the dangers of a holy war in the English and French territories.

In the Balkans themselves, however, joy was literally unconfined. A glorious opportunity was theirs to strike off all the shackles binding them to all the Powers. Such an opportunity would certainly never return. They feared Austria most, Russia next, and England and France least. While the Turk was the Sick Man of Europe, maintained in desuetude, while the powers were interested in the Balkan States merely to keep them out of one another's hands, Balkan independence was very real, and the rule of Turkey over their brethren in the Turkish Empire was too inefficient to be burdensome. But the spectacle was terrifying in the extreme of the organization in Turkey by German hands of a strong centralized administration with a large and efficient army, trained, financed, and officered by Germany and Austria, and directed to the furtherance of the latter's interests. Such a Turkey would be a neighbor and ruler of a different stamp. The very excellence and justice of the administration which the new regime proposed to institute would remove the *casus belli*, the gravamina of Macedonia and Albania. Should many men of the stamp of Hussein Kiazim Bey be appointed, and should they use elsewhere the vigor he displayed as Vali of Salonica in punishing the Turkish gendarmerie for the commission of crimes and atrocities, the most apparent and telling evidences of Turkish misrule would disappear.

Moreover, an alliance with Austria and Germany, however favorable the constitutional or diplomatic relations might be, would mean to the Balkan States the surrender of their own independence and the acceptance of dictation from Berlin or Vienna of a policy made in the interests of the latter. The economic benefits looked distant and nebulous: the rich trade of the East would hardly stop at their doors to afford them profit. The positive disadvantages in time of peace were certain: the coalition would make them its fortress

for defense and offense. In time of war the disadvantages would be even greater, for the battles would be fought within their borders. If they were ever to achieve liberty, they must strike before Turkey became more efficient, and before one or the other coalition took possession of them by main force.

So far as Turkey was concerned, there was little effective resistance to be expected from a state torn by internal dissensions between the Old and the Young Turks. With the revolutionary Party of Union and Progress actively opposing the ministry, with a strong belief in foreign capitals and chancelleries that the new regime was no better than the old, with the new Turkish army effectively marooned in Tripoli, and the Italian fleet holding the AEgean, the chances of success for the Balkans were at the maximum. The probability of European interference with the beginning and prosecution of the war they knew to be slight, for they clearly saw what each side hoped to gain from their efforts. That each group of great powers depended upon their cooperation for the furtherance of its own interests, made it not unlikely that a really strong confederation of Balkan States, if not actually able to exact its own price from either side, would for some years at least be able to play off one party against the other, and so afford an opportunity for the consolidation of its own union, and the development of the immediate advantages of victory to such an extent that armed interference would become a serious matter for any coalition, however strong. They well know that the country itself is a natural fortress, already improved by all the devices of modern fortification; that their armies contain more than half a million men, natural soldiers, well equipped by their "friends" money, and well instructed by their "friends" officers in all the multifold strategical and tactical advantages of their country.

Such men, fighting for independence, ought to be able to hold such a country even against Austria or Russia. If they cannot win it, with Turkey weak and disorganized, with Austria and Russia determined to thwart each other's ambitions, they never can maintain their independence. This is their greatest, and perhaps their only opportunity. While the Powers, therefore, complacently watched the struggle with Turkey, each confident that the Balkans were fighting in their interest, the Balkans were actually fighting for their own independence of the Powers themselves. Moreover, by beginning a campaign, which they knew would be short, in the late autumn, they practically insured themselves six months in which to take advantage of their victory; for the severe Balkan winter, already upon them, will make any effective armed interposition by either Austria or Russia exceedingly difficult, if not impossible.

The position of the confederates dictated the strategy of the war. The Servians and Montenegrins were to begin the war in the west, partly in hope of drawing the Turkish forces thither and so weakening the main army, partly because it was their duty to overrun Albania and be in position to attack Macedonia on the flank at the moment when the Greeks delivered an assault in force from the front. The two, thus victorious, would together overrun Thrace and fall upon the rear of the main Turkish army if the Bulgarian assault upon Adrianople had not yet succeeded, or on its flank in case the Turk had been driven back on Constantinople. Whichever won first would be immediately in a most advantageous position to assist her allies whether they were victorious or defeated.

Rumania remained inactive, to be ready to defend the rear from possible attacks from Austria or Russia.

The rapidity with which these combined attacks were delivered prevented the concentration of the Turkish army at any point, and also made its provisioning and administration exceedingly difficult. The astounding vigor and ability of the Bulgarians enabled them to drive the disorganized and hungry Turks into Constantinople before the western and southern movements were finished, and have rendered the complete overthrow of the Turkish power in Europe merely a question of time.

The confederates intend to treat only with Turkey; they deny the right of the powers to interfere; they are themselves agreed upon the settlement; and hold possession of everything the Powers want, with armies aggregating at least half a million men, flushed with victory, and entrenched in a natural fortress. If the plans of the allies succeed, the King of Greece is to be president of a federation composed of the independent states of Bulgaria, Rumania, Servia, Greece, and Montenegro. Crete, the AEgean Islands, and the greater part of Macedonia will be annexed to Greece; most of Thrace to Bulgaria; Albania to Servia. The rest of European Turkey, including Salonica, presents the most difficult problem.

Needless to say, these arrangements will be very disagreeable to Austria and Italy, who desire to erect Albania and probably Macedonia into kingdoms, with Austrian or Italian princes as kings. The Balkan States point out that these districts are merely geographical expressions,--the people possessing unity neither of race nor creed, and lacking even a common language,--and insist that nothing but trouble for themselves and their neighbors can result from granting them autonomy. This does not weigh heavily with the Triple Alliance, the members of which are anxious, if they cannot avert the settlement, to provide for its prompt failure. England and France, and probably Russia, seem to be in favor of strengthening the existing states, and decry the 'ungenerous' policy of snatching from them the fruits of victory.

The really vital difficulty lies in the existence of Constantinople. The Balkans will insist upon the removal of the seat of Turkish government across the Straits; the Powers will hardly consent to anything less than the neutralization of Constantinople and the Straits. In any case, armed interference is highly improbable. The strength of the confederation in men and resources, the approach of winter, the nature of the ground where the battles would be fought, the antagonistic interests of the coalitions, will in all probability prevent more than a show of force by either Austria or Russia. The lack of money might bring the Balkans to terms, were it not practically certain that England and France will finance them. Whether or not foreseen and inspired by those two nations, the war has resulted in giving back to them the strategic position in the Mediterranean, lost through the conquest of Tripoli by the Triple Alliance. Moreover, they have won it without vitally increasing their own dangers from Russia. The latter will be entirely satisfied with freedom of passage to and from the Black Sea, and will create there, with their entire approval, a strong fleet which will become a factor in future movement in the Mediterranean. At the

moment of writing the Balkan War is a victory for the Triple Entente over the Triple Alliance.

As an outcome of the struggle it is hard to foresee anything short of destruction for Turkey in Europe. With the loss of Albania and Macedonia, there will be little left except the district immediately around Constantinople, which, though containing the vast majority of the Turks on the northern side of the Bosphorus, has a numerous and hostile Greek element in the population. There is not, and never has been, any racial or religious basis for a Turkish state in Europe. The Turks belong in Asia Minor. The ability of the Turk to stand in either place without support is doubtful. Administrative decentralization has fostered dishonesty, disobedience, and corruption so long as to make them almost racial traits, which render the Turk poor material for the independent self-government so eagerly desired by the Young Turks. And this very attempt at administrative centralization and honest government rouses the subject peoples and offends the Powers. Only because the Turk was hopelessly inefficient and submissive was he allowed to exist at all. The work of the Committee of Union and Progress, whose ideal is the exclusion of foreigners from Turkey, settled its ultimate fate. Like Persia and Egypt, Turkey must be governed in the interests of Europe and not in its own. Whatever happens, the Turk will be again reduced to inefficiency and subserviency.