

The War in the Balkans

Max Nettlau

1913

It has been arranged that I should state why my sympathies in the present European crisis are unconditionally with Turkey and Austria. Theoretically, we cannot sympathize with any existing State, large or small; but in a case of murderous assault, which is what war is, sympathies are with the party attacked and not with the aggressor. It is different in the case of bona-fide revolts, the courageous initiative of maybe hopeless minorities; but *States* do not attack another State except when they think it can safely be done. I will do my best not to identify peoples and Governments, though history shows that a warlike policy, if successful, is never disavowed by a people, who always expect to profit by it. France was never so happy as she has been since Millerand resuscitated noisy and aggressive patriotism. In the present case I refuse to follow those who make a nice distinction between the dear people of Tolstoy—and occasionally of pogroms—and official Russia, whilst Turkey is to them “the Turk,” who is nothing but hopeless, unspeakable, everything that is bad.

The present struggle is, in my opinion, not a struggle between little Montenegro and big Turkey, little Serbia and big Austria, but between the isolated Turkish and Austro-German interests, strictly on the defence, and unfettered Panslavist greed, egged on and supported by the bitter and absolute enmity of France and England against everything that is German. We saw how public opinion was “educated” by politicians and the Press, until the South African War became “inevitable;” the same game is going on about Germany—these are the first-fruits of this campaign.

Turkey *in past centuries* was a danger to Europe, of which none is better aware than Austria, invaded as late as 1683, as far as Vienna, by a Turkish army “of 400,000 men, officered in part by French captains and engineers, lent for the service by Louis XIV, who was anxious to see the Imperial [Austro-German] power humbled in the dust” (“The Story of the Nations,” Vol. XIV., p. 226, 1908 ed.). To-day the Slavonic countries, backed up by Russia, make a similar step forward, to crush Turkey and to humble Austria, with every shirt on the backs of their armies paid for by loans from Republican France, which, like the Imperial France of the Napoleons and the absolute monarchy of Richelieu and Louis XIV, has but one aim—to crush the German power.

The advance of Turkey was definitively stopped by Austria two hundred years ago (Treaties of 1699 and 1718). Russian advance dates from about this time; the classic example is the ruin and destruction of Poland. But why did Prussia and Austria take part in the division of Poland? Simply because otherwise Russia would have taken *the whole* of Poland (just as England to-day

is taking half of Persia, lest Russia should seize the whole of it). By holding the port of Danzig, the Baltic would have been made a Russian sea, and German development strangled. Russia, then, was incessantly striving to gain ground against Turkey (eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), fostering discontent and fomenting insurrections among the Christian Balkan Slavs. It is exactly this which *provoked* the sometimes harsh treatment of these nations by the Turks and always prevented real reforms; for the Turks were fully justified in seeing the hand of Russia in all this; and when they struck the Bulgarian peasant, they meant to strike the Russian behind him, who pulled the strings.

The situation in Turkey *before* everything was embittered by Russian intrigues is thus described in the “Historians’ History of the World” (London, *Times*, Vol. XXIV, p. 362): “The difference between the lot of the rayahs [Christian peasants] under their Turkish masters and that of the serfs of Christendom under their fellow Christians and fellow countrymen, who were their lords, was practically shown by the anxiety which the inhabitants of the countries near the Turkish frontier showed to escape from their homes, and to live under that Turkish yoke which is frequently represented as having always been so tyrannical.”

Of course, until late in the last century all the Powers, England before all, saw what Russia’s real aims were, and that Turkey’s power was an invaluable check on Russian advance in the Near East. As the Balkan Slavs threw in their lot with Russia, they had to bear the consequences, and may still have to do so. When Greece, in Byron’s time, rose to a sincere struggle for independence, all Europe took her cause up and forced the leading statesmen to save the Greeks from being crushed. But in all that was done in Turkish Slavs Russia’s hand was too visible to inspire confidence or sympathy in any but Panslavists or Garibaldian enthusiasts. Russia’s desire—oh, so unselfish!—to become the protector of the Christians in Turkey was met by France and England with the Crimean War.

After the Franco-German War of 1870–71, Russia wished to pay herself for the neutrality she had kept by a raid on Turkey. To obtain Austria’s neutrality in face of this Slav expansion on the Balkan—politics *are* the game of taking or giving mainly what belongs to *other* people—Russia, at Reichstadt (July, 1876), secretly pledged herself to let Bosnia and Herzegovina (where the accidental insurrection in July, 1875, had been kept alive to keep the “Eastern question” going) become Austria’s part and never Serbia’s—a transaction fully brought to light in 1908 during the annexation crisis, when Russia would fain have forgotten all about it.

At that very moment Gladstone played into the hands of Russia by taking up the “Bulgarian atrocities” of May, 1876. He did so, not, of course, to turn Disraeli out of office; still, whatever his real motives were, his action paved the way for Russia’s project to “liberate” as much of Turkey as she could get hold of. The effects of Gladstone’s oratory are felt in England to this hour, and are helping Russia’s game in 1912 as they did in 1876. It is difficult to believe in the sincerity of the indignation over the tenth, which has something in it to attract their patronage. If all nations which committed horrors in times past were to be the subject of a permanent vendetta, everyone’s hand would be against everyone else. The slaughter of the people of Paris after the Commune, the endless sufferings of the reaction of 1863 left Gladstone silent. When Russia “liberated” the Turkomans by wholesale massacre, when the Amur was filled with Chinese corpses, when Persian Liberals were hanged, now wide-sounding atrocity cry is raised. But just mention “the Turk,” and all the horror-mongers are up in arms. The indelible effects of early religious teaching, the hatred of the “enemies of Christianity,” are at the bottom of this, however free-thinking some

Turkophobes may fancy themselves to be; eternal hatred and the craving for revenge are such thoroughly Christian virtues!

After the Turkish War (1877–78) Russia's greed as shown in the Treaty of San Stefano (March 3, 1878) was so intolerable that united Europe, England and Germany in the front, tore that treaty to pieces at the Berlin Congress (June, 1878). Europe knew at *that* time what "liberation" by Russia meant; the peoples of the Caucasus and of Central Asia, Mongolians and Persians, Poles and Finns, know it still better. Russia is constantly "liberating" all round, her own people even by hanging, deporting, or starving them!

Austria occupied Bosnia by order of the Berlin Congress, after hard fighting against the Turks (1878). This step was, by the way, bitterly opposed by the German-speaking Austrians, and cost them their political supremacy, the Emperor from that day turning to the Slavs, and Austria has since been the paradise of the Slavs, who unceasingly wage Nationalist warfare on the Germans, whose patience is well-nigh exhausted. Bosnia remained undisturbed from that time, the only Balkan territory of which this can be said. When, in 1908, the Young Turks re-established the Constitution of 1876, Austria proclaimed the annexation of Bosnia, whilst handing back to Turkey the district of Novibazar (absorbed to-day by Servia and Montenegro). This question was peacefully settled with Turkey, and Bosnia got a local Parliament. This really had to be done, because, after the assassination of King Alexandra and Queen Draga of Servia, Peter, an abject tool of Russia, got hold of the throne of Servia, since when that country had shown persistent sullen hostility to Austria, and coveted Bosnia and other territories. If the Turks held Bosnia, Servia would have taken it from them on an occasion like the present war, and the whole Balkans would then have been under Russian control, Austria losing what Russia herself had guaranteed to her in 1876.

Servia had no claim whatever on Bosnia, yet, believing herself intangible with Russia at her back—Russia keeping dubious silence, and France and England, her present friends, encouraging this attitude—she left the question of peace or war in suspect to the very last moment. This caused enormous expense and terrible anxiety to the peaceful Austrian population—and in 1912 the same game was repeated at Austria's expense.

Bulgaria, after taking Eastern Roumelia from Turkey (1885), was attacked, not by the Turks, but by their brother Servians, who got beaten to an uncommon extent. Austria then saved Servia by bidding the Bulgarian advance to stop. Bulgaria tried to get along without Russia; some may still remember the famous exodus of General Kaulbars. But from that moment sneaking violence ruled supreme; the kidnapping of Prince Alexander of Battenburg, the hacking into pieces of Stambulov, who had fearlessly opposed Russia's plots and bombs everywhere—all this tended to persuade Prince Ferdinand, who is no fool, that Russia urgently desired his friendship, and so Bulgaria took the loyally proffered hand, though the ambitious Ferdinand may think that the last word has not yet been said. The machinations of the Russian Minister at Bucharest, Hitsovo, were proverbial at the time; all this is abundantly proved by history.

By and by the Balkan intriguers thought it advisable to create a centre of fermentation in Macedonia; so the famous "bands" made their appearance, containing some enthusiasts, no doubt, but also good professional brigands, and political agents to pull the strings. These killed, firstly, Turks on sight, to keep up their "revolutionary" character; secondly, Christians of rival nationalities—the Bulgarians killing Greeks, the Greeks Bulgarians, both of them Servians, and vice versa, the few scattered Kutzo-Wallachs (Roumanians) being the common game of all three, while the Albanians, who hit back, were rather left alone; thirdly, they each levied blackmail (patriotic contribution, I ought to say) on the villagers of their own nationality, and killed these when they

refused; fourthly, internal quarrels were settled by murder—Boris Sarnfov, the originator of the band system, died in this way. Thus, Macedonia was the murder's happy playground; and when the Turks killed or hanged a few, an outcry would be raised by English Balkan Committees, and *reforms* would be urgently demanded from Turkey. If the fiftieth part of these Macedonian band outrages had happened in Ireland, she would have seen Cromwellian days, and Home Rule would be buried for ages. But the *cruel* Turks, after their bloodless revolution in 1908, simply proclaimed a *complete amnesty*, and then enjoyed the spectacle of these heroic bands coming in in the form of the bandits and vagrants of the district, some quarters of their respective nationalities, being secret service men. At this moment (1908) a stream of light fell on all these anti-Turkish machinations, but everything seems forgotten now.

Ever since 1908, when Russia's effort to get at Turkey by England's permission, as the price of joining England against Germany (Reval meeting of King Edward and Nicolas), had been frustrated by the Young Turks' revolution, Turkey has found spokes in all her wheels. The Abdul Hamid gang was encouraged to try a counter-revolution. The Albanians were cunningly estranged from the Turks; Nicolas of Montenegro, whom Alexander III called "my only friend," had a hand in this—Russia, of course, did not, her friends will say! Italy, with her Montenegrin queen, committed the Tripolitan brigandage. When Turkey's best officers went to Africa, the remainder were set to fight each other last summer. The Macedonian brigands started in business again; the Kotchana explosion killed peaceful inhabitants, Turks and others. What wonder that the Turks retaliated at last and killed a number of Christians; they would not have been men in they had suffered these outrages to go on permanently unmolested. There is no country in the world, I make bold to say, where so much cold-blooded murder has been committed against a peaceful peasant population such as the Turks are, and all this amidst the applause "reactionary" German countries, where the utter hypocrisy of all this and the detestable underlying motives are understood from an experience which the vicinity of Russia unfortunately gives to the natives of these countries. Anybody, however, who can put two and two together may see that the Turkish Government, instead of being a powerful despotism, must be infinitely weak and powerless, to let all this go on, to let these "liberating" band thrive and provocation become a permanent institution.

At present, then, reaping the fruits of all this, when Turkey is exhausted by a year's war with Italy, with the Arabian and Albanian revolts, etc., and when anti-German hatred and a bellicose spirit have been rekindled in France and are aflame in England, Russia is trying to hit hard at Turkey and at Austria at the same time.

This is the origin of the Balkan conspiracy of 1912, which besides many facts already made public, the state of complete preparation for war of the Allies and the unpreparedness of Turkey show to have been skillfully engineered. Turkey has fought better and inflicted more losses on them than they care to admit, though the truth is now filtering through. Of course, now that Turkey begins to have a chance to win yet, her very good friends at once try to persuade her not to fight any longer. Heads, I win; tails, you lose—this lofty morality always inspires the Christians in their dealings with "the ruffian Turk"!

At the beginning of this war an attempt was made to revive the stories of Turkish atrocities, but it was really felt they were all lies, and after the Allies' first victories no more was heard of them. accounts of atrocities committed against Turks, on the contrary, began to come in from everywhere—from Montenegro, where strangely few *wounded* Turks were brought in, to Albania,

where the Servians are said to have slaughtered the Albanian Mahometans wholesale, and to Salonika, where the first act of the Greek “liberators” was a little pogrom.

I will not mention the present state of the Macedonian population after so many years’ sway of the bands; but the condition of the Bulgarian population when Turkish rule ceased, in 1877, is thus described in “The Cambridge Modern History,” Vol. XII, 1910, p. 383:—“Economically, the condition of the Bulgarians during the later years of Ottoman rule contrasted favourably with that of some independent Christian races..... In fact, the Russian officers who visited Bulgaria during the war of 1877 found that the “little brother,” whom they had come to free, were better off under the Turkish yoke than many of their own *mujiks* under the benevolent despotism of the Tsar. In the words of an impartial eye-witness, to exchange places with the Bulgarian *rayah* ‘would have been no bad bargain for the Russian peasants.’”

Bulgaria and Servia are now free to advance to the Ægean Sea, though neither Greece nor, I believe, England, nor even Russia, quite likes it (Russia especially, because she is jealous of any *real* independence which her tools might acquire). Servia, however, was egged on to insist upon an Adriatic port and the connecting Albanian territory. This would really mean that Russian influence, which can now cut off Austrian commerce with the Orient by land, could also in the near future “bottle up” Austria by sea in the Adriatic, a situation which Austria cannot stand, and over which she must go to war, if necessary. If Russia, before she became England’s dear friend, had, for example, insisted by hook or by crook on getting hold of a Scandinavian port, opposite England or Scotland, England would not have tolerated this either. Over this question, as in 1908 over Bosnia, Servia was insultingly sullen and protracted a definite explanation with Austria, boasting of Russian support, which, if “officially” denied is, of course, unofficially given, as everybody sees. Thus, as in 1908, and more so now, Austria is faced with the eventuality of war with Servia and Russia, which causes ruinous expenses, the stoppage of business, anxiety, and irritation of the whole population.

This intolerable situation could have been put an end to by *one word* from Russia to Servia, or, if Servia will not listen, to Europe. Again, *one word* from France or from England that financial support would be withdrawn from Russia if she made war over this, would bring Russia to her senses. No, *no one* speaks that word; and the Austrian population, for which I for one feel sorry, must pass all these weeks in this terrible anxiety. This attitude of these three great Powers, to me, is simply fiendish. They stand by and gloat over Austria’s difficulties, which a single word, be it peace or war, would solve. They may not like to go to war, but they delight in inflicting economic ruin by their studied silence, which costs them little or nothing. All this because of Russia’s racial hatred of Germans, because of France’s lost glory, Germany having had the audacity to be victorious in the war of 1870–71; and because of England’s deadly hatred of Germany for her temerity in having a prospering industry and commerce, and a navy of her own. Racial fanaticism, the spirit of domination and reckless commercialism combined—these three wage war against all who will not cringe before them, and some will *not*.

Needless to say that the Peace Societies all over the world have already found safe shelter in mouseholes, and are no more heard of. Socialist oratory is going off in harmless fireworks. The French C.G.T. succeeded also on this occasion in remaining in splendid isolation. And in old Freedom these things have to be said, as a belief in Russia’s good faith is still alive in some excellent comrades!

December 12, 1912.

M. Nettlau.

P.S.—The present crisis *may* end without a European war arising from it, but what is there to prevent the situation of 1908 and of 1912 occurring again? Servia will again do something to provoke Austria, feeling quite immune now against retaliation. Austria will not let herself be strangled economically by a third crisis, but will then have to fight Russia once and for all. How happy and peaceful Europe might live if France and England, supposed liberal and advanced countries, did not with all their might back up Russian despotism. By this they impose militarism and constant economic depression on the Central European German countries which mean no harm to them, and they prevent any real development of the Slavonic countries which remain under the heel of Tsarism, paid by France and countenanced by England. As long as the French and British working classes permit their Governments to uphold Tsarism in this way, they remain themselves worse oppressors of the Slavonic peoples than the Turks ever were. They would put an end to this and to many other things, if only they knew!

December 23.

[We print this article of one of our oldest comrades as stating one view of the Balkan struggle. But we must add that it does not express the opinions of all. Some of us are in hearty sympathy with the struggle of the small nationalities to free themselves from the rule of a powerful Empire.—Ed.]

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