

Tsarist Russia and the Balkans: A Brief Historical Overview

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The Balkan Peninsula, together with the region of South-East Europe, historically has been one of the most important focal points of Russian foreign policy, cultural influences and attempts to spread an ideology of the Orthodox solidarity and the Slavic reciprocity.[1] These ideas are common to almost all trends of Russian public life in the past and very much today too.

After Russia lost the Great Crimean War of 1853–1856 she intensified its cultural influence in the region of South-East Europe for the purposes of beating Habsburg (Roman-Catholic) rivalry and to spread the idea of Pan-Slavism in that part of Europe.[2] However, the Great Crimean War was, in essence, the British war against Russia (Figes, 2010; Lambert, 2011; Small, 2014) in order to stop further Russian victories against Ottoman Empire (Isaacs, 2001, 156; Anisimov, 298–299). After this war, it became obvious for Russia that Western European Great Powers[3] are her enemies, especially United Kingdom, like with the current case of an extreme Russophobic Cabinet of Theresa May and Boris Johnson. It will take even 50 years for Russia to sign a military-political agreement with United Kingdom (in 1907) only after a final sharing the spheres of influence in Persia (Hans-Erich, 1985, 134).[4]

The political and economic rivalry between Russia, on one hand, and the Habsburg Monarchy (Austria-Hungary from 1867) and the German Empire (from 1871), on other, over the dominance at the Balkans[5] was strongly affected in Russia by the growth of Pan-Slavic sentiment, based on the common Slavic origin, mutual Paleoslavonic language, and above all it was grounded in emotional sentiment to liberate those South Slavs who were under Ottoman yoke (Jelavich, 1991).[6] Historically, Russia had three pivotal interests in both the Balkans and South-East Europe: 1) Strategic; 2) Cultural; and 3) Religious (Castellan, 1992). It is important to stress a fact that Russia, together with Western European states, participated in the process of modernization and Europeanization of Eastern Balkan nations and states from the beginning of the 19th century till the WWI (Black, 1974).[7]



Flags of states with Slavic population

From a strategic point of view, Russian diplomacy considered the Balkans and South-East Europe as essential for Russian state security and above all for the stability of Russian state's frontiers.[8] Russia's intention was to obtain a favorable frontier in Bessarabia (today's the independent Republic of Moldova) and to have a control over the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, which became very important to Russian commercial and economic development and geopolitical projects; in particular for the shipment of surplus grain from

today' Ukraine or a *Little Russia/Russia Minor* (Pryzhov, 1869; Solovyev, 1947)[9] to the world markets.

The Bosphorus and the Dardanelles became a part of Russia's "security zone" in both economic and political terms. Russia's main concern was to safeguard free passage through the Bosphorus Straits to the Mediterranean Sea (Jelavich, 1973). Simultaneously, Russia intended to block the expansion of other European Great Powers, particularly of Austria-Hungary and Germany, into the region[10] but especially in its eastern part.

Taking religious and cultural aspects of Russian interests in the Balkans and South-East Europe into account, largely due to Russian Pan-Slavic agitation, Russia succeeded to develop from 1870 onwards a strong interest in the fate of the Balkan Slavs and South-East European Orthodox Christians.

Pan-Slavism, based on the myth of Slavic solidarity and primarily on Orthodox Slavic reciprocity, which created a strong ethnic, religious and cultural sentiments among Slavic Orthodox population (but not among Roman Catholic Slavs), became at the end of the 19th century one of the dominant driving forces behind Russian policy in the Balkans and South-East Europe. The myth of Slavic solidarity and brotherhood exerted a considerable influence on many intellectuals and found support in official circles in Russia, Serbia, Montenegro, and Bulgaria[11] especially after Russia's liberation of Bulgarians in 1878.

Tsarist Russia was sincerely trying all the time to reconcile Slavic nations in conflict, especially those of the Christian Orthodox faith for the sake of Pan-Slavic ideals of intra-Slavic solidarity, reciprocity, and brotherhood.

Probably the case of the Serbian-Bulgarian conflict in 1912–1915 over the Macedonian Question is the best example of such Russian policy of Panslavism. In other words, Russia became the creator of the 1912 Serbian–Bulgarian treaty and recognized arbiter in the 1912–1913 diplomatic conflict between Serbia and Bulgaria over the destiny of Macedonia during the Balkan Wars (Ćorović, 1990a, 20–24).

Russian Balkan policy, in this case, was a real Panslavonic as St. Petersburg wanted to satisfy territorial claims of both sides by negotiations and diplomatic agreement between Sofia and Belgrade.[12] When Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia on July 23rd, 1914 all Entente member states, including Russia,[13] were making pressure on Serbia to give territorial compensation (Vardar Macedonia) to Bulgaria for Bulgarian participation in the war against the Central Powers.

Serbia was promised, like in the secret 1915 London Treaty, territorial concessions in Western Balkans populated by the ethnic Serbs living in Dual Monarchy (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Slavonia, and South Dalmatia). Diplomatic pressure on Serbia to cede certain territories to Bulgaria (Vardar Macedonia) continued up to the autumn of 1915. For instance, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey D. Sazonov, on August 5th, 1914 urged Serbian Government to give to Bulgaria Macedonian territories up to the line Kriva Palanka–Ohrid with Struga for Bulgarian active participation in the war against Austria-Hungary and towns of Shtip, Radovishte and the lands up to the Vardar River for Bulgarian "friendly neutrality". For such Serbia's sacrifice, Russia promised Belgrade to support Serbia at the end of the war in the realization of her "national ideals" (annexation of Serb-populated lands of Austria-

Hungary). However, Sazonov was clear in this case that Serbia by giving such territorial sacrifice is going to very contributing to Russian "life's wish" to establish Panslavonic fraternity and eternal friendship between Serbs and Bulgarians (Радојевић, Димић, 2014, 138). The same territorial requirements to Serbia were vainly repeated once again by the Entente member states in 1915 before Bulgaria finally joined the war on the side of the Central Powers in October of the same year (Avramovski, 1985, 55–172; Trubetski, 1994, 21–158).

Unfortunately, Serbia rejected such friendly Russia's proposals and as a consequence lost 25% of its population during the WWI, 50% of industry and the most important - the statehood. Instead of a strong and efficient United Serbia there was created loose, destructive and above all anti-Serbian Yugoslavia with the Roman Catholic Croats and Slovenes as the clients and a „fifth column“ of Vatican.

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Notes

[1] The Balkans is a peninsula in South-East Europe that today includes Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, Albania, Macedonia (the FYROM), Bulgaria and the European portion of Turkey. The South-East Europe is enlarged Balkans with Romania and Moldova.

[2] The Balkans was all the time a peninsula of a clash of civilizations. According to Samuel P. Huntington, a civilization is a cultural entity and he identified eight such civilizations. One of them was Slavic-Orthodox. Civilizations differ in terms of history, language, culture, tradition but above all of religion. Huntington argued that every civilization had and has a protector core state as, for instance, Russia historically was and today is a protector of Slavic-Orthodox civilization (Mansbach, Taylor, 2012, 447).

[3] A Great Power was originally in the 18th century the term for a European state which could not be conquered by any other state or even by several of them. After the WWII this term is applied to a country that is regarded as among the most powerful in the global system and global politics (Mansbach, Taylor, 2012, 578).

[4] British-Russian convention over Persia in 1907 divided the country into a northern section under Russian influence, a neutral part in the middle, and a southern zone under UK's influence (Palmowski, 2004, 304).

[5] About the importance of geopolitical position of the Balkans, see in (Шушић 2004, 9–88).

[6] About Pan-Slavism, see in (Kohn, 1960).

[7] About Russian history, see in (Riasanovsky, 2006).

[8] About Russia's foreign policy interests, see in (Tsygankov, 2013; Gvosdev, 2014).

[9] About Ukraine-Russian identity relations, see in (Plokhy, 2008; Plokhy, 2010).

[10] About the spiritual and geopolitical rivalry in the Balkans by the Great European Powers, see in (Поповић, 1940; Narochnitskaya, 1998). According to Lord Palmerston, the nations (states) have no permanent enemies and allies; they have only permanent interests (Cooper, Heine, Thakur, 2015, 72).

[11] For instance, about Russia's influence in Serbia from the end of the 18th century to the mid-19th century, see in (Попов, 1870).

[12] Serbian-Bulgarian conflict over Macedonia continued during the WWI. On Bulgarian war aims and diplomacy from 1914 to 1918, see in (Avramovski1985; Hrabak 1990).

[13] About Russia's policy on Serbia after delivering of Austro-Hungarian ultimatum to Belgrade, see in (Бјелајац 2014, 183–196).

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