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The Principal Causes of the First Balkan War

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When describing international relations in the latter part of the 19th and 20th centuries, it must be framed in the context of tumultuous political disorder. The once great empires of the past are dissolving into individual states; almost every former European hegemon is reduced in size and power as the ethnic inhabitants push for the creation and international recognition of their own nations. These growing pains eventually give way to the modern concept of states following the ideas of self-determination and national sovereignty, transitioning to a system with new, smaller states mixed with volatile, ailing empires.

The Ottoman Empire had claims in Europe for more than 500 years before the subordinate regions initiated the exodus of Ottoman control over the territory in question (Gewehr 1931:79). The Balkan powers of Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Montenegro seized a moment of clear weakness in the Turkish government to stage the First Balkan War. The goal of the Balkan states was to definitively remove the grasp of the Ottoman Empire from its hold of the area and to divide the retrieved territory among themselves (Holt and Chilton 1917: 490-491). They were not the only states in Europe to whom this issue was salient; Russia had immense hopes of attaining access to the Black Sea, and therefore pushed them to action, while the Austro-Hungarian Empire did not want Russia to gain this access or to see a fellow kingdom dissolve (Thaden 1965: 43, 122; Chilton and Holt 1917: 486). Ultimately, after an eight month entanglement, the Balkan states had successfully stripped Turkey of nearly all its territorial claims in Europe. There are a myriad of factors that led four modestly populated states to attack a former world power, but two key determinants are the critical and swift rise of nationalism in the peninsular states, and the waning power and stability of the Turkish government that spawned the confidence of the belligerents during this transition. Though both contribute to the

development of the First Balkan War, Turkey's "sick man of Europe" image was the primary reason for the instigation of aggression, with nationalism allowing the movement to be so successful and definitive (Kennan 1993:5). As will be discussed, never was there a more advantageous time for a surge of cooperation within the Balkans, united against Ottoman's long standing claims over highly contested ethnic territory.

In 1878, through the stipulations of the Treaty of Berlin, two of the belligerents, Serbia and Montenegro, secured their independence from the Ottomans. Thirty years into the future, Bulgaria would too declare total independence precisely one day before the start of the Bosnian Crisis. Greece had already transitioned away from Ottoman control in 1832, with the help of several European powers. The Bosnian Crisis strained relationships between Russia and Austria-Hungary and created further uneasiness in the Balkan Peninsula because of the heavily desired territorial gains that could be produced by eliminating Ottoman control (Gewehr 1931:85). Revolts and other troubles within Albania also introduced more tension in the peninsula as it vied for independence against the new government of the Young Turks, who were striving to assimilate and force "Ottomanization" upon their Balkan charges without success or support (Gewehr 1931:88).

As indicated, Turkey was losing clout in the region rapidly, and was faced with turmoil as it struggled to regain stability in the midst of a crumbling structure that was emphasized to the international community primarily by the Italo-Turkish War and again by the annexation of Bosnia. The ease with which the Italians obtained their objective spurred the mentioned Balkan states into forming a quadripartite alliance known as the Balkan League to further pursue their territorial ambitions in March of 1912. The League was met with resentment from the great powers due to their interests in maintaining their own alliances the "status quo," but with adamant disapproval from Austria-Hungary and Germany, primarily because they disapproved

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of the probable disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and were concerned with the "containment of Russia" (Thaden 1965:117-122; Blainey 1973:63). Russia's aspirations of territorial advancement lead to its full support and desire for action in the Balkan League, but hesitated at the notion of Bulgaria controlling the Black Sea. Separate alliances between the participants were made prior to this, designating the territorial spoils each would receive in the probable event of a war with Turkey. These treaties further provide a more transparent way to understand the motivations behind the states' offensive cooperation: Serbia's hope for integration of Albanian and Macedonian territory, Bulgaria's integration of southern Macedonia, Greece's desire to unite with Crete, and the Montenegrin's wish for part of Albania. Montenegro, though not as involved as the others, understood the importance of ridding the Balkans of the Ottoman presence while it was feasible, and was the first to declare war against the Ottoman Empire. Each member of the Balkan League had individual aspiration pitted toward the Turks, but could not achieve them solely by relying on their own capabilities and could not justify engaging in a total war simply for heavily desired territory.

Mobilization had started just before official declarations of war; Montenegro, growing impatient, finally declared war on the Ottoman Empire on October 8, 1912, with the rest of the Balkan League quickly following suit just 10 days later. In an effort to maximize each state's contribution, each member of the Balkan League focused on a particular aspect of the assault against Turkey. Bulgaria's armies were focused directly towards the areas of Thrace onward to "threaten Constantinople," while Serbian and Montenegrin forces were aimed at expelling the Turks out of Macedonia (Holt and Chilton 1917:490). Greece's infantry had a reputation for being rather inept, prompting views that purported "If there is a war [between Greece and Turkey] we shall probably see that the only thing Greek officers can do besides talking is to run away;" fortunately their navy was not only functional, but assisted in hindering logistical and

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tactical planning, like hampering its methods of sending reinforcements or supplies by sea (Fotakis, 2005:42; Holt and Chilton 1917:490). Turkish war preparation and execution fared little better than its disappointing performance in the Italo-Turkish war. It was hampered by the uprising of the progressive Young Turks, a movement that aspired to resuscitate the Empire, but failed even to morph into a modernized army despite efforts focused specifically on this.

Massive disorganization and institutional instability guaranteed the dominance of the Balkan League over the once great Ottoman Empire. There were reports of "lack of supplies" and "of an efficient officer corps," and even more remarkably, a high rate of soldiers with broken noses as the result of "having held their guns improperly while firing" (Helmreich 1938:204).

After an obvious slant in the fighting favoring the four allies and the pronouncement of Albanian Independence, negotiations began to emerge at a London peace conference in December of that year. Any progress through negotiations was halted by a political upheaval in Turkey; the resilient Young Turks had once again forcibly overthrown the Sultanate and effectively ended the peace negotiations and armistice, favoring continued resistance against the Ottoman decline. Eight months after the declarations of war, a more successful round of consultations led to the Treaty of London, thereby ending the First Balkan War and leaving Turkey without control over the Aegean Islands, Crete and its former provinces in Europe and, excluding a small area stretching from Enos to Midia, harboring the Dardanelles and Bosphorus straits (Helmreich 1938: 331). The stipulations of the territorial gains immediately caused strife between the allies; Albania's independence encroached on Serbia's intended territorial gains, providing relatively little recompense for its wartime effort. Bulgaria was equally provoked by Greek and Serbian infringements on its pre-war claims to the southern portion of Macedonia. Serbia adamantly refused to cede any of its gain to Bulgaria, thereby ignoring the Serbo-Bulgar Treaty from the pre-war alliances, unwilling to lose even more of its previously apportioned land

(Gewehr 1931: 90). Thus, the stage and temperaments were set for the second of the two Balkan Wars, in which the former allies would succumb to their mutual rivalries in the quest for the finite amount of contested land in the Balkan Peninsula.

The war was fairly damaging for Turkey, resulting in more than twice the number of Turkish casualties as those of the Balkan League and the loss of valuable territory in the peninsula. Turkey had no opportunity to establish a reliable government or to recover before the outbreak of World War I, naturally straining the state's frailty even more, leading "the Turkish nation [to be] threatened with extinction by involvement in World War I" (Shaw 1977:396). Because of the numerous, highly compacted ethnic identities within the region, the war successfully "unleashed the accumulated hatreds, the inherited revenges of centuries," and the nature of the revolution prompted an extreme backlash from noncombatants, giving them "the opportunity of vengeance to every peasant who cherished a grudge against a harsh landlord or a brutal neighbor" (Kennan 1993:71). The war was brutal for both participants and bystanders, each suffering "at the hands of armies flushed with victory or embittered by defeat," further playing into the notion that ethnic wars tend to inflict the most anguish and brutality-based excesses because of the shared history but divergent nationalistic proclivity (Ford 1915: 33). The First Balkan War proved the powerful effect that self-determination within an area can have, even on an empire that has controlled the region for half a millennium. This ideology welcomes an age of great movements for independence by chronically subordinated peoples at the hands of the powerful kingdoms, but also of habitual violent clashes over topics of ethnicity and power; Serbia's indignation and displeasure as a result of the Balkan Wars continued to manifest itself, steeped in negativity and conflict, for essentially the next century.

The success of the Balkan League was somewhat unexpected and unprecedented. The events of the war transpired to a clear, resounding defeat for the Ottoman Empire, despite its

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historical military superiority over the small Balkan states. Though countless factors preside in the formation and initiation of every war, the First Balkan War had two determinants that were the primary propellants of the military conflict, those being the rise of nationalism, with the new concept of ethnic identity becoming prominent and initiating aggressive ideas of territorial expansion, and the very visible diminution of the Ottoman Empire; both are strengthened by underlying aspects of power transition logic. Each gives significant contributions for grasping the sentiments and motivations behind the war while extending their logic to the rationale that inevitably led to war.

Historically, conflict within the Balkan Peninsula has been attributed to racial and ethnic divides between the various kingdoms of the region; the many revolts and the periods of violent unrest corroborate this, especially immediately preceding the war, with "the collapse of order in the Albanian regions" (Pavlowitch 1999:196). The Balkans have never been particularly pacifistic, viewing war as "a process which includes rape and pillage, devastation and massacre" and as part of their evolution have endured and internalized numerous past hardships under the influence of the halfmillennia rule of the Ottoman Empire (Kennan 1993:108). The various ethnic groups had always been chaotically assembled under the Turks as one entity, but in the 19th century slowly began fostering ideas of their unique identities. This determination to revive traditional cultural identities was a prevalent movement in the world throughout this time, with colonies effectively revolting against Old World empires, taking control of their sovereignty, as demonstrated by the success of the former Spanish colonies. Nationalism within a state gives the leaders a viable medium with which to rally and later extract from their societies, making it one of the residual catalysts to many worldwide conflicts because of how easily it garners the public support and enthusiasm for the war, especially in states with a more revisionist focus.

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Nationalism in the Balkans can be construed as a very active part of the motivations for war; it can be seen as the direct reasoning that propelled the actions and cooperation of the afflicted states. When placed as a nationalistically charged, semi-cohesive group, the Balkan League effectively morphed into the revisionist states bent on self extension that Schweller describes (100). Under Schweller's auspices, the Balkan League collectively would fall under what he describes as "wolves," states that seek "to maximize, or significantly increase their power" (100). Typically states that are identified as wolves seek dramatic systemic changes, but the Balkan's were solely focused on regional goals. In this instance however, they would still be considered as "wolves" because of their desire to expand and their dissatisfaction with the status quo. Fortunately for the Balkan League, the power of the Ottoman Empire was astoundingly diminished, allowing them to follow their nationalistic zeal with reckless ambition, fighting "with a fire and frenzy" as would be expected from "hereditary enemies" (Ford 1915: 33). If, however, the Ottoman Empire had been of the same quality of its past, the grip of self determination would still have led to the intense desire to eject Turkey, but would have blocked the potential of the Balkans and been in the slightly less aggressive "jackal" category (100). The strong pull of nationalism allowed them to produce a much more substantial force than Turkey, for they were fighting for their liberty, giving them the edge to be in the "wolf" category. Though not akin to Hitler's or Napoleon's level of revisionism, they initiated a war with the knowledge that the powers could intervene on behalf of Turkey, thereby making their newly found nationalistic fervor a contributing factor to their ultimate downfall, but they believed in their mission enough to risk their existence as free states. They were not particularly risk adverse in the prewar negotiations because of Russia's predicated support, and the absence of reliable warnings from other powers.

The League was able to expand and become formidable during the development of the

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conflict because of an essential power vacuum created by the influence of Russia and the lack of credible threats from the other European powers. The Balkan's ideology of racial justice and its hopes for Balkan reform were met with warnings about the consequences of disturbing the status quo, yet the new confidence and determination for their quest spurred the continuation of the objective (Blainey 1973: 63). The fact that the Balkan League essentially ignored warnings from the top powers to refrain from war shows the unreliability of threats at the time, due to complex webs of interconnectivity between those powers that bound them from following through with their demands. The issue clearly was not dire enough for them to risk their alliances or assets over; they "were really more interested in avoiding a war among themselves than a localized war in the Balkans" (Thaden 1965:130).

Although the powers were not effective in their threats during the prewar lead up, they did articulate their resolve when they summoned the rivals to London for the first round of mediation; which is when the Balkan League realized the potential consequences of provoking much more stringent European authorities that easily could dominate their forces and threaten their overall sovereignty (Pavlowitch 1999:198). At this point the League became aware of their mortality and the relative insecurity of their position in the system, reverting away from their original "uninhibited fear of loss" when solely facing the overextended Ottoman Empire (Schweller 1994:104). The foundation of all of the confidence and thereby the drive of every action or inaction was the original sense of bonding over their Slavic past, to preserve their peninsula from outside powers. The Empire had already proved that it would not stand up against Austria-Hungary after it annexed Bosnia, and the other Balkan powers balked at the idea "that Austria-Hungary would try to get a European mandate to occupy Macedonia," thinking in terms of preservation of their relative power in the peninsula, and of the protection of their fellow Slavs (Pavlowitch 1999: 196). Nationalism burned in the motivations for numerous

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atrocities committed before and during the war, and served as reassurance to the League's cause.

During the prewar era, ideologies were provoked, leading to subsequent declarations of independence from the Ottoman Empire. At the time of the war Austria-Hungary had recently annexed Bosnia, Bulgaria had just gained full sovereignty, Albania was vying for its own independence, and looming above all was the "the struggle over Macedonia" (Jelavich 1986: 208). Each of the Balkan states wished for this area's incorporation because they all felt they had requisition to the intensely diverse population, claiming it for their own nationality. All felt that the expulsion of the Turks from the prized area would be an ideal step in boosting and protecting their relative power, especially with the Austrian-Hungarian annexation so freshly engrained in their memory, the idea seemed like a credible move towards greater autonomy from the powers outside the peninsula. This accumulated to a great feeling of Pan-Slavism around the peninsula that had loosely existed since Serbian independence. Once a movement of this nature has the proper momentum urging it forward, it is with great difficulty that it does not mature into a legitimate conflict. When negotiations for reform with Turkey ended and the Balkan League was created there was a great push to finally rid the peninsula of the decaying power and reclaim the ethnically charged territory under Ottoman control. Nationalism acted as a catalyst for each decision that led to the outbreak of war. With clear aims, nationalistic self assurance, and hopes for reciprocity from atrocities committed, the Balkan League was determined to expel Turkey from the peninsula because the "sympathy, indignation, and horror conspired with nationalistic aspirations and territorial interests to arouse the kindred populations of the surrounding states" (Schurman 1914:33-34). The effect of extreme forms of nationalism would be revealed later as the German Volk began to develop, but that is just another example of the willingness to commit to certain causes that states and their people can be drawn to if it is framed in the context of ethnic and racial conflict or cultural territory.

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A well known observation of the time was of the pronounced weakness of the Ottoman Empire, which was so engrained in the cause and nature of the First Balkan War. In every regard, the instability and decay of the Empire was evident, from the disappointing performance in the Italo-Turkish War to its government's inability to impede further disintegration of their domain. This common knowledge of the internal vulnerability Turkey faced is the most significant factor behind the causation of the First Balkan War. With the rise and splendor of every great empire there is an equally long period of decline, particularly with the "many nations [that] nibbled on her territory and influence," and eventually the former imperial Turkey, shadowing a supernova, imploded on itself (Blainey 1973:185).

Blainey's "death-watch war" theory can clarify why the apparent weakness of the Ottomans was such a significant contribution to the war (69). This was not necessarily a matter of succession, but rather a myriad of factors that lead the international community's opinion of Turkey to be similarly unfavorable as if a weak monarch had ascended to power, thus "tilting the scales of international power" to ultimately favor the revisionist minded Balkans (Blainey 1973: 69). In a typical war of succession, the new ruler has the potential of being a target to expansionist states because of their inherent frailty due to young age, loss of allies, or other marked disadvantages (Blainey 1973:69). The same weakness is translated to the Ottoman's seemingly ever changing government, because it provides that exact level of instability, or opportunity from the Balkan standpoint. Blainey also describes how "civil unrest, like the death of kings, marked the crumbling of established authority and therefore affected perceptions of national power" (70). One static aspect of the Balkans is civil unrest, there seems to have been perennial clashes over ethnicity, religion, or territory, and in some altercations all three, just months before the war; revolutionist Turks "killed or wounded several hundred Macedonians" with bomb in a marketplace (Thaden 1965:104). Albania feared annexation or being split among

the surrounding countries, while in Macedonia a movement began decreeing that "Slavs in Macedonia were neither Bulgars nor Serbs" (Jelavich 1986:210).

There is a connection that this war was established on the grounds of Blainey's "scapegoat" theory because of the abundance of civil strife. However, civil strife seems to be a near constant in the peninsula, not just an isolated incident during this time frame, so this can be construed as a lesser contributor to the overall progression to the war. Lastly, according to the theories of power transition, the Balkans were fortunate enough to be changing in ways that gave them the confidence and prediction of comparatively inexpensive conflict that they needed to propel their aggression. They were more expansionist oriented because of their propensity for a redistribution of power in the region, which was manifested in their actions to unify against the common threat. Fortunately for them this transition of power was predicated by the certainty of Russia's support. While the Ottomans wished to maintain the status quo, thus preventing further damage to their kingdom, the Balkans managed to construct a league in preparation for aggression because of the ease of with which they foresaw defeating Turkey and for their desire to share in the implementation and creation of the current political order. Because of their dominance in the situation, they exhibited "less fear of reprisal" because the Empire's disintegrated state indicated that they would be "less able to retaliate later" (Evera 1999:123).

Having established Turkey's reputation as a failing state, it is important to examine why the former Empire was in such a vulnerable position whilst other empires like Austria-Hungary were completely stable. Turkey was amidst the political fallout from the Young Turk revolution of 1908 and counter coup that followed, which cast an ominous shadow over Balkan unity because of the Young Turk's attempted "curtailment of the activities of Slavic and Greek nationalists" (Thaden 1965:62). With each change in authority there was a new system of government; the Young Turks sought to reestablish the Constitution of 1876 and the removal of

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the Sultan Abdul Hamid, though they failed to achieve the latter until after the counter-coup. The proclamation of Bulgarian independence and Bosnia's annexation were very detrimental to the Young Turk movement; the losses of those two European territories gave momentum to their opponents who staged the counter-revolution (Jelavich 1986:215). The political uncertainty of the time visibly displayed the overstretched Empire's weakness, especially when this coincided with losing a large tract of land to Bulgaria, and Austria-Hungary's overt encroachment. This substantive amount of governmental inadequacy was also compounded with the ongoing war against Italy in Libya, which was not faring well for the Empire.

In the midst of the political turmoil, the Empire was seemingly casting around for any opportunity for reprieve and resurrection of their nation, even imposing an ill-advised boycott on Greece, hoping for it to definitively "renounce Crete;" this two-year boycott on commerce hurt namely Ottoman Greeks, but severely hurt the Muslims whose livelihood was tied to shipping, further indicating the magnitude of their political misguidance (Gewehr 1931:88). For having very little clout in the international system, Turkey was involved in a dense web of interactions with other states, but none were willing to intervene on its behalf. This lack of alliances made the Ottoman Empire an even more prominent target for the Balkans, and when the powers did become involved it was solely to prevent each other from gaining an unfair advantage, not to lessen the demise of the Empire. Furthermore, as the Empire was dissolving it attempted to try more methods of assimilation through its territories to no avail; the only thing this promoted was more resentment from the expansionists in the Balkans. The transitional nature of the Turkish government, the blatant military and organizational weaknesses highlighted by the Italo-Turkish War, the civil strife within the occupied territory and Turkey's renowned reputation as the "sick man of Europe" gave an unprecedented opportunity to the Balkan states to expel Turkey and reap the many benefits (Keneen 1993:5). These components accumulate to portray Turkey, not

as a sick man, but as a man near death, again giving the Balkans the chance to seize the many advantageous of ousting the Ottoman Empire. Despite attempting to appear formidable, every aspect of the Turkish plight relayed its faltering stance to the international system, and for the Balkans, the multitude of weaknesses amplified their potential of winning and therefore served as more motivation to take an aggressive stance on Ottoman expulsion.

In light of the evidentiary support of both primary causes of the First Balkan War, the latter does seem to provide a more tangible conception of what led the Balkan states to war against Turkey. This does not diminish the immense role nationalism played, but it was more a tributary that aided in the overall scheme of the prewar lead up. The nationalistic vein isn't completely able to support itself; it derives its legitimacy from the influence of Turkey's weak image and power transition that was taking place. The justification for the cooperation between the Balkan League came in part from nationalistic ideals, but namely because each of the actors had something to gain from Turkey's exodus. The absolute dissolution of the Balkan League and beginning of the Second Balkan War proves the lack of a true feeling of Pan-Slavism that trumped all individual state aspirations. The League's main purpose was as "a vehicle for the attainment of the antagonistic aims of its members" (Gewehr 1931:121). The regions are very ethnically divergent, so a true sense of overwhelming nationalism emanating from Macedonia and the rest of the Balkans would be a true feat of cooperation, but with individual incentives involved the mystery of the ease of the cooperation became more transparent. Nationalism helped push the powers to exploit the Empire's weaknesses and may have been the ideological reason, but the *casus belli* spawned from the extreme transition of power that had slowly occurred, whether "due to inefficiency and corruption in government or the injection by the Young Turk part of politics" (Schurman 1914:56).

Seldom can the cause of a war be whittled down to one motivator or catalyst, but is rather

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a mass of smaller occurrences that cumulate into a broad, multi-faceted impetus for the initiation of force. In this war, after all the parsimonious aspects meld together, the overall cause was the potential for great Balkan gains and success because of the Ottoman Empire's drastically feeble state, with issues of nationalism, the support of Russia, the recent Russo-Turkish War, and the noncommittal attitudes of other European powers which fed the Balkan quest for the removal of Turkey. The opportunity for the Balkans was in fact too great to ignore, because each had ambitions that could be realized by exploiting Turkey's adulterated state; nationalist zeal played into an already forming plan. The hope of ridding Turkey from the Balkan Peninsula was considered a true benefit for the belligerents because of the added security, territorial gains, and secondarily, as a matter of cultural preservation, but the success of the Italians in gaining their ends by war upon Turkey, and the success of the Albanians in gaining their longed-for reforms by continued insurrection" was the paramount inspiration the Balkan's decision to exploit the resplendent opportunity of Ottoman weakness, and thus the singular most significant cause of the First Balkan War (Holt and Chilton 1917:486).

Winston Churchill mused that "the Balkan states produce more history than they can consume," while Otto von Bismark quipped that "if there is ever another war in Europe, it will come out of some damned silly thing in the Balkans." These two exemplary quotes illuminate the context of the strife that has typically been associated with the Balkan Peninsula, both by men that need no introduction in the political realm. The events that lead to the rise of the First Balkan War were interconnected and exacerbated each other, making a linear, cause-and-effect progression difficult to follow. There were many actors vying for their own interests to parse out a simple account of what happened prior and during the war. All that can be determined is that a mixture of outside influences from Austria-Hungary and Russia, a feverish spread of independence in the region in the years prior and in Albania during the conflict, as well as the

Macedonian territory at stake, pushed the Balkan League into seizing the chance to cast the peninsula free from Ottoman control during its era of weakness.

Turkey had been declining for some time, but with the Italo-Turkish War and the annexation of Bosnia, its inability to protect its interests was broadcast to the world. This spurred a movement within the Balkans to capitalize on this opportunity and exploit Turkey into ceding its European territory to the victors. Many factors contributed to the creation and outcome of this movement, especially the prevalence of nationalism from the different Slavic ethnic groups, but ultimately this translated into the momentum of the already forming scheme against "a Turkey torn by internal crisis" in the hopes of a satisfying Serbian, Bulgarian, Greek, and Montenegrin "historical goals" (Thaden 1965: 57, 110).

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