

УДК 355.48

Moore A.L. (3-rd year, Languages Department, University of Sussex, UK),  
Kuzmin I.D., associate professor, PhD

## THE BALKANS AND THE PRELUDE TO WORLD WAR ONE

The spark for World War in 1914 was the assassination of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne in Sarajevo. This very fact illustrates the centrality of events in the Balkan Peninsula to the causes of the war. The two states with vital – and conflicting – interests here were Austria-Hungary and Russia; and the fundamental question is why conflict between the two arose here, and in a way which by 1914 could only be resolved by resort to war.

Russia's interests in the pre-war period would have been adequately served by maintenance of the status quo in the Balkans (that is of a weak but stable Ottoman Empire retaining nominal control of the region). This situation, however, was being made increasingly untenable, particularly in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, by periodic collapses of Turkish authority in the region.

Since her defeat in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, Russian foreign policy concerns had become increasingly focused on the Balkans for two main reasons.

a) strategically and economically, the guarantee of access to a warm water port through the Dardanelles was very important. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire threatened to let these fall into potentially unfriendly hands.

b) Russia's status as a World Power increasingly following defeat in the Far East, rested to a great extent on her patronage of smaller Slavic states in the area – Pan-Slavism.

The fate of the Balkan area was, however, of equal if not greater interest to Austria-Hungary. Since the final unification of Germany around Prussia in 1871, Austria-Hungarian status, as well as to a large extent her economic interests, rested on her position at the center of a multi-national Empire. Any concessions to other than prevalent nationalism – and specifically to Serbian nationalism and Pan-Slavism – which were freed and encouraged by the continued decline of Turkey – threatened the Austro-Hungarian Empire with total disintegration.

As long as the situation in the Balkans remained relatively stable the interests of both powers were, therefore, sufficiently secure; but as Turkish power retreated, leaving behind a number of newly independent states, likely to be influenced by one or other of their larger neighbors, any tip in the balance of power in the area in favor of one, inevitably threatened the other.

For Russia any further Austro-Hungarian encroachment into the Balkans (particularly following the failures of the Bosnian crisis of 1908) potentially threatened both access to the Mediterranean from the Black Sea and also her position of influence in the Balkan area. For Austria, as we have seen, any growth in local nationalism was very threatening. The only possibility of preventing this once the oppressive hand of the Ottomans had been removed was to spread into the area herself.

The interests of both powers were, therefore, essentially conservative and defensive, but required, by force of circumstances, offensive action – the spreading, if not literally of borders, then at least of influence – in order to secure defensive interests. As the buffer zone provided by Turkey retreated, each needed to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of Ottoman authority herself in order to prevent this vital area falling into potentially unfriendly hands.

This conflict of interests reached its peak following the final collapse of the European area of the Ottoman Empire after the Turkish-Italian War and then the Balkan Wars of 1912-13.

By this stage the interests of both powers were sufficiently threatened and insecure that the July crisis of 1914 merely provided a reasonable excuse on both sides to attempt to finally resolve the unstable situation in their favor.

The beginning of the First World War was essentially a Balkan affair. That the other Powers

became involved was not, however, primarily due to their interests in this area, but of alliances which reflected other – primarily economic and strategic – conflicts; but the Sarajevo crisis pushed all to a point where these simmering but intensifying conflicts had to be resolved.