The First World War as a Geopolitical and Diplomatic Divide in World History

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Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

The 100th anniversary of the First World War (1914 - 1918) is an appropriate occasion for looking beyond the interpretations and hostilities of the events themselves and for fitting public memories and historiographical insights into a more objective picture of the structural transformations that made possible the first global war in the history of mankind the greatest historical divide of contemporary history. Such an approach and the discussion of its various theoretical and pragmatic aspects in a prestigious forum as this one is worthwhile and I am much grateful for being able to contribute my thoughts and comments as a historian and political scientist working on 20th century international relations.

Speaking here in Sofia about the war year 1914-1918, we should have in mind the fact that for the Balkans those years lasted longer and in fact started in October 1912 with the First and then Second Balkan War. The two Balkan wars of 1912-1913 were the logical conclusion of a particular stage in the development of the national states in the Balkans in the course of modernity and a chain in the sequence of events resulting from the internationalization of European diplomacy and politics and their response to the globalization trends of the 20th century[1]. Being in fact the regional highlight of the much more global diplomatic, political and military confrontation between the Central Powers and the Allies in the First World War, the Balkan wars became the prelude to the thorough geopolitical restructuring of the 20th century.

In this paper I speak about the years of the greatest geopolitical and diplomatic divide of the 20th century. It included and brought about a series of fundamental transformations such as:

- the end of empires and the fall of dynasties;

- the rise of new ideologies and the belief in social engineering through visionary projects of social transformation;

- the advent of new actors in international relations and the creation of a totally new environment in which they acted;

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[1] Probably the most cited English language history of the Balkan wars is E. C. Helmreich, *The Diplomacy of the Balkan Wars 1912-1913* (Cambridge, Mass., 1938).

- the liberal ideas of the transformational role of international law, the corresponding institutional structures and the failure of their conflict management mechanisms;

- the initiation of coalitions of alliances and coalitions around values to stop aggression and repair the world order and their break up due to the results of dividing the spoils of the war issues and the efforts of creating a more stable and predictable international environment.

Looking back at the war years and their aftermath here in Sofia in September 2013 we can attest that the military actions of 1914-1918 (for the Balkans - 1912-1918), the human sacrifices and the resulting social and political transformations in the different states had a stronger impact than the ones usually available through national history textbooks and the standard historical narrative characteristic prevailing in the last few decades. Without calling for any kind of historiographical revisionism or postmodernist type of theoretical deconstruction of WW1 interpretations, I want to draw your attention to some important, in my mind, similarities and differences in the way the region, Europe and the world looked like not during but in the post-war period – in 1914 (for the Balkans) and 1919 (for Europe and the world). In order to have an even wider historical perspective why this was the greatest divide I will also point out to the other great divides of the century – those of 1945 (after WW2) and 1990 (after the Cold War).

You will most probably immediately grasp my desire to challenge the prevailing narrative through the comparisons between the Balkan interstate system after 1913 and the much more global trends of the Versailles international system after 1919, the Cold War system after 1945 and the present one after 1989. For me both the systematic similarities and differences are equally important and revealing in understanding what really happened in the 20th century and how the Balkans after being considered as the powder keg of Europe (thus forwarding the events of August 1914) turned into an example of the broader transformations of the international system exemplifying the general trends and outlining the regional specifics.

Speaking about the structural transformation in the international system, we must compare several of its key elements in order to point out the striking similarities and differences in the different historical periods. Although economic and technological might, geopolitics and the

redrawing of the political map are at the heart of contemporary diplomacy and warfare, the most interesting aspects of studying the Balkan wars in the wider European context can come from the analysis of the new actors born in the international system, the environment they were prone to act in and the new international order leading to new linkages and a basically new alliance system with new practices.

Why were the Balkan Wars so important in terms of the events that produced the Great War of 1914-1918 and its aftermath throughout the 20th century? One of the reasons is pure chronological and accidental, the other however is much more substantial and structural. In terms of chronology the Balkan Wars were the last pre-1914 diplomatic and political crisis in Europe. Coupled by the Tripolitania war, they tested the new European/global alliance system and paved the way to the events of the summer of 1914 (again triggered in the Balkans) that produced the first global military conflict in human history. In this sense even the chronological comparison is important as it shows the interplay between local, regional and global factors (something similar happened in 1945-1947 when the Greek Civil War affected the new Cold War order or with the Yugoslav Wars after 1989 that shaped the new international order). Far more important however was the effect of other trends affecting the very fabric of the international system and linked with the break-up of the 1815 Vienna Congress system of guaranteeing European peace and security.

For nearly a hundred years there was not a large pan-European war and the Great Powers and the smaller European states worked together through the network of dynastic and national interests for safeguarding peace – thus came the 1878 Berlin Congress settlements that pretty much set the stage for the war years. That pan-European system in fact was the last high-point in a period of about four centuries in which Europe had dominated the agenda of world events and had clear hegemony in world diplomacy. The 19th century was clearly the European century of all and it was the Balkan wars as just one of many events signaling the end of European hegemony. If we state today (as it was mentioned here), that the Balkan war years can be regarded as the end of the Ottoman period in Balkan history, it is really also true that the post-1918, post-1945 and post-1989 world were the periods in which Europe entered globalization and it was no longer the sole center of the international system. Important non-European actors such as the Soviet

Union[2], United States and others changed the very structure of geopolitics and the prevailing mechanisms of the international order that paved the way for the present geopolitical reading of the term *globalization*.

Another element in the same discourse in regional sense was the perception (in Western civilization terms) of the nature of the Balkans as a common historical denominator. 'The Balkans' entered the 20th century as an increasingly popular, yet ambiguous, term, it was seen as 'liminal Oriental' as well as a descendant from the classical era. The two Balkan Wars and World War I brought about a radical negative change at two levels: the geopolitical and the symbolic. The negative geopolitical impact of the Balkans was succinctly expressed through the term 'Balkanization' launched by journalist Paul Scott Mowrer in 1921[3]. It referred to 'the creation, in a region of hopelessly mixed races, of a medley of small states with more or less backward populations, economically and financially weak, covetous, intriguing, afraid, a continual prey to the machinations of the great powers, and to the violent promptings of their own passion'[4].

The post-1920 Western construction of the Balkans saw it not only as a region of conflict, but as a region with the capacity to entrap the West by drawing it into a larger war[5]. The geopolitical instability brought about by an increased number of states was heightened by the concern with the particular identity of these states as being states of violence, brutality and passion, but 'Violence as the leitmotiv of the Balkans was, strictly speaking, a post-Balkan wars phenomenon'[6]. A less prevalent construction argued by for example Stoianovich claimed that the Balkan propensity for violence was vastly overrated, but that the Balkan people were highly emotional and characterized by 'impulsiveness and especially the ease with which they can pass from one emotion to its

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[2] The Soviet Union, of course, was preceded as a major actor in international relations by the Russian empire which played an important part in the Eastern Question and the trends in the Balkans. For the peculiar role of Russia in the Balkan wars see: Andre Rossos, *Russia and the Balkans: Inter-Balkan Rivalries and Russian Foreign Policy 1908-1914* (Toronto, 1981).

[3] Paul Scott Mowrer, *Balkanized Europe: a study in political analysis and reconstruction* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co.).

[4] Maria Todorova, *Imagening the Balkans,* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University press, 1997), p. 34.

[5] Benjamin Miller, Korina Kagan, "The Great Powers and Regional Conflicts: Eastern Europe and the Balkans from the Post-Napoleonic Era to the Post-Cold War Era" – *International Studies Quarterly*, Issue 1 (March 1997), p. 51-86.

[6] M. Todorova, *Op. cit.*, p. 122.

opposite even in our own time. Joy gives way to tears and lamentations, the tearing of hair, and the beating of breasts, and tears and lamentations yield to rejoicing[7]. The Balkans were seen as geopolitically and emotionally unstable, although this 'emotionalism' could be articulated in a more or less violent direction; nor was this emotionalism completely without attractions to Western observers who found that modernity had come at the cost of the loss of passion[8]. Paradoxically, the considerations about Balkan passions and the brutality caused by the Ottoman influence appeared only clearly in the Western discourse in the 1920s, in other words at the time when the Ottoman Empire had already lost its political hold on the Balkans[9].

The Cold War brought a radical decline in the use of the Balkans as a derogatory term. The bipolar configuration of power made the Balkans a part of the East European Other, with Greece and Turkey returning to their classical ambiguous roles[10]. The breakdown of communism and the Warsaw Pact in Eastern Europe brought back the concept of Balkanization as a synonym for instability, even before the wars in the former Yugoslavia put 'the Balkans' squarely at the core of Western foreign policy debate[11]. Eugene Mihail analyzed in a 2012 article[12] the dominant theme that the West had developed an image of a Balkan propensity for extreme war violence that had remained unchanged ever since 1913. That article challenges the presumptions of continuity and uniformity revealing that more often than not Western attitudes to violence in the Balkans varied considerably, reflecting different ideological or strategic assessments. While in 1912–3 there developed indeed a common Western image of the two Balkan Wars, subsequently the two World Wars led to a diversification of the Balkan images on national lines. Thus the victorious Allies' produced some important postwar myths (both after 1918 and 1945) with a positive view of Balkan war violence. The Second World War and the Cold War

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[7] Trajan Stojanovich, *A Study in Balkan Civilization,* (New York: Alfred A. Knopp, 1967), p. 50-60.

[8] John Allcock "The Yugoslav Crisis and the West: Avoiding "Vietnam" and Blundering into "Abysinia" – *East European Politics and Society*, 1991, vol. 8, No 1, p. 189-219.

[9] M. Todorova, *Op. cit.*, p. 122.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 136.

[11] John Allcock Past as Preface: Civilization Politics and the "Third" Balkan War – *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 37, May 2000, p. 354-362

[12] Eugene Mihail, Western Attitudes to War in the Balkans and the Shifting Meanings of Violence, 1912–91 *Journal of Contemporary History April 2012 47: 219-239*

established new standards of extreme violence, pushing even further back those negative public associations of the Balkans associated with the period 1912-1913.

In this discourse we should point out another important characteristic of the international system in the 20th century. Quite often in the analysis of the post-1918 and especially of the post-1945 period the prevailing feature is either the clash between Communism or Capitalism or the struggle between democracy and dictatorship, between totalitarian repressions and democratic values. In this type of discourse one aspect is frequently forgotten – the process of decolonization. If the American War of Independence at the end of the 18th century brought about the decolonization to the new World in the Americas, it was the Balkan Wars and the First World War that brought about the decolonization to the Near and Middle East and to vast area of Eurasia (due to the dissolution of several Empires – Austria-Hungary, Russia and the Ottoman Empires). Later into the same shoes will step other colonial capitals to bring about national liberation to nations and states in the Far East, Asia and Africa. In terms of the international system decolonization meant the increase in the pure number of actors in world and regional diplomacy, shifting alliances and changes in the balance of powers. As the Paris system included much more states than was their number before 1914, in the same manner the United Nations experienced a major shift in the power blocks inside the international organization as the members states increased dramatically after 1960 and the decolonization of Africa. Something quite similar happened after 1990 with the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union and some other multinational states.

The continuing ambiguity of the Ottoman role in the construction of Balkan identity is at the heart of the debate between the different civilizational perspectives after 1990. This ambiguity is expressed in the difference between those who approach the Balkans as one civilization - often seen as influenced by the Ottomans - and those who approach the Balkans as a meeting ground - whether 'meeting' is understood in terms of battle or dialogue - between different cultures: Ottoman/Islamic, Orthodox and Catholic. There were other aspects – the Huntington's ideas of the *Clash of Civilizations*[13], the *Carnegie Endowment original report of 1913*, the New Carnegie Endowment Report of 1993/96 with

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[13] Samuel Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, (New York: Touchstone, 1996)

new prologue written by George Kennan[14] and *The Balkan Ghosts* by Robert Kaplan[15] giving alternative explanations of the Balkan nationalism and common identity issues. Thus the Balkan Wars opened a theoretical and methodological debate in civilization terms which are vital even in the third millennium.

In conclusion, there are three basic theoretical points on the effect of the war years in the new millennium. They represent the historical replay of <u>Tradition v. Modernity</u>, of <u>National/regional identities v. Globalization</u> and finally - of <u>Integration versus Disintegration</u>. All major transitions in European history in the 20th century – after 1913, 1918, 1945 and 1989 respectively were analyzed in terms of the modernization trends, especially in more backward, traditional societies as the Balkan ones. Nevertheless quite frequently the push of modernity often produced a backlash to tradition – in political structures, institutional relationships and cultural links. Obviously the effects of globalization shaped the emerging new regional or national identities at a time when empires, kingdoms and federations went through a process of failure and transformations (the overall environment and approaches to international and internal conflict management in 1990-1993 was not easier than those after 1918 and 1945). And last, but not least – the liberal tendencies in international relations went hand in hand with the hard, realist approaches thus having the idealistic and liberal vision of global and regional integration clashing quite frequently with the realist notion of disintegration based on national interest and factors of local geopolitical strength. That easily brought to the forefront of international politics the question of wars, violence and personal and group humiliation.

Indeed, the 20th century was an epoch of extreme violence. Yet it was also the era of human rights and humanitarian protection of civilian populations, at least on the level of international conventions and a thick web of institutions designed to implement them. *At the international level*, this major shift in political conceptions and policies can be described as the move from the Vienna system to the Versailles one or as some authors call it – the Paris system. Vienna centered on dynastic legitimacy and state sovereignty within clearly defined borders. Paris

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[14] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Report of the International Commission to Inquire into the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan Wars* (Washington, D.C.: The Endowment, 1914); republished as *The Other Balkan Wars: A 1913 Carnegie Endowment Inquiry in Retrospect* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1993.

[15] Robert Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History*: (London: Picador, 1993)

focused on populations and an ideal of state sovereignty rooted in national homogeneity. The move from one to the other marks the shift from traditional diplomacy to population politics, from mere territorial adjustments to the handling of entire population groups categorized by ethnicity, nationality, or race, or some combination thereof. "The Vienna system" is a common term; "the Paris system" is a phrase not in use, probably because of the great failures of the post–World War I settlements.

But arguably, the Paris system has had as great or even greater an impact on the course of the 20th and even the early 21st century as the Vienna system had on the 19th. The Paris system partitioned territories along supposedly ethnic, national, and religious lines; legitimized forced deportations; consecrated civilization and humanitarianism as express political goals; and moved the protection of rights from the purely national to the international level. It brought about the notion of pariah states and at the same time, the abject failure of the Paris system truly to protect minorities (evident most clearly in the genocide of Jews) resulted after World War II in the partial reformulation of rights as inhering in individuals, not in groups. Quite similarly – after 1989 the end of the Cold War produced the term "failure states" that legitimized international intervention and breech of national sovereignty due to a humanitarian crisis and threats to the well-being of individuals.

There is much to be learned by locating the origins and determining the core principles of the international system that succeeded Vienna, even when they might not have been crystal clear to the participants sitting around elegant conference venues in London, Berlin, Paris, and Lausanne, nor completely and uniformly implemented. How, within a brief one hundred years, did the international system move from the acceptance and promotion of multi-ethnic and multi-confessional societies and states to a system in which the state was the presumed representative of one nation, with both humanitarian and lethal consequences for populations great and minor?

The Paris system was the consequence of two preeminent factors: the liberal principles that had risen to domination over the course of the 19th century, and European imperialism, both formal and informal. As their influence expanded into the Ottoman Empire and Africa, the European powers, collectively and individually, had to learn how to manage populations more diverse and more unruly than those they had encountered previously. They confronted rebellions by Bulgarian

peasants and cattle-herding Herero, demands issued by Armenian activists and Arab nationalists, and power plays by individual European states in the eastern Mediterranean and the Congo basin.

Now, in the 21st century we look back to those war years and the trends in regional and global diplomacy they triggered. The few parallels I pointed out and some of the conclusions made are not universal and solid-proof. They were rather a provocation of historical thinking and historic arguments in the search of a general and more sophisticated truth about the recent and more distant past. That truth has been based upon documentary evidence, public memory and the prevailing theoretical concepts about major historical trends. But each generation writes its own history and thus a century later we might be able to come closer to the universal truth seeing beyond battles, diplomacy, nations and personal hardships. Because that truth requires a more calm, balanced, multi-perspective academic approach. I will be glad to answer any questions that might have arisen.