

Robert Wilton

ANSWERING THE WRONG QUESTION: 100 YEARS OF MISREADING THE BALKANS

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Exam preparation: attitudes behind intervention

'The object was to localise the war,' Sir Edward Grey declared to the House of Commons in the summer of 1913. 'With regard to the rest, provided Constantinople and Asiatic Turkey and the Straits were not touched, the rest could be fought out among the combatants themselves without interference... It is to be borne in mind that in making that agreement the primary essential was to preserve agreement between the Great Powers.'¹

The motives of the Great Power diplomats at the Conference of London were two-fold: to arrest the continuing disintegration of the status quo in the western Balkans and - related to this, because of the impact of the Ottoman collapse on imperial calculations - to advance or at least protect their individual strategic interests. Humanitarian concerns were an added impetus and a contribution to the climate of debate, but hardly a prime motive. This paper argues that the same approach has continued to characterize international interventions in the region throughout the ensuing century - a focus on stability rather than sustainability; self-interest rather than selflessness - through the attempts to exploit the region in the conflicts against fascism and then communism, to the attempt to fit the region into an EU-centric model of diplomacy and development.

With hindsight, the London Conference was of course a typically feudal piece of Great Power diplomacy. None of the six Powers involved in the Conference of Ambassadors and dictating the outcome of the negotiations had a soldier fighting. The warring parties could try to shape the outcome by their

¹ http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1913/aug/12/war-in-balkans-statement-by-sir-edward#S5CV0056P0_19130812_HOC_336, retrieved November 2013

manoeuvres on the ground, but - as in the case of the occupation of Shkodra-Scutari - Great Power pressure could reverse these adjustments. The delegates of the warring parties were in their separate, junior conference; the representatives of the Albanians had no formal role, and were being taken around London by sympathizers in search of a listening ear. In the context of the politics of the time, this approach was unremarkable; indeed, given the relative immaturity of the warring parties and the tangle of treacheries, it was arguably unavoidable. Nonetheless, it had implications. Moreover, although that era of frock-coated, top-hatted, oligarchic diplomacy might seem antique a century later, the attitudes and errors of the Conference of London have recurred.

It is clear - for example in the British Parliamentary debates of the time - that the priority was not primarily the disputes of the Balkans. Instead, the diplomats were worried about what those disputes might provoke among the Great Powers. When Sir Edward Grey reported to the House of Commons, he spoke of the achievement in sustaining 'the Concert' of the Powers, and speaker after speaker from Government and Opposition congratulated him for having done so.² The solution was satisfactory not for its inherent aspects, but because it satisfied the Powers. Independent Albania was possible because it suited both Austria-Hungary and Italy. Its creation was a triumph not of Wilsonian self-determination, but of nineteenth century great power balancing. The overall package was a reflection of Russia's relative weakness. For all of their sympathy for the Balkan allies and their exploits, the British MPs wanted to manage the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, not help the new states. Given what happened less than a year later, when the Powers failed to stop a Balkan dispute becoming European, their focus in London seems prudent.

Nevertheless, it displays an enduring short-sightedness. The Great Powers - whether grouped as a Conference of Ambassadors or a European Council - have always walked into the Balkans with their eyes fixed high on their own strategic interests.³ In 1913 they wanted to maintain the balance of power

² 'It ought to be borne in mind that the Concert of Europe set itself to one object, and that was, to localise the war, and on the whole, I think, the Concert of Europe has been wise in setting itself that object and not going beyond that object. To attempt more might have been to endanger the whole Concert.'
http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1913/aug/12/war-in-balkans-statement-by-sir-edward#S5CV0056P0_19130812_HOC_336, retrieved November 2013

³ The defective vision is starker in retrospect: in a conference and then in the debate considering the fault-lines of what would become the first world war, British diplomacy was most interested in the Aegean islands, 'some of [which] have most important strategic positions'. (<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1913/aug/12/war-in->

among themselves. In the 1940s they wanted allies in the war they were already fighting. In the 1950s they wanted foot-soldiers against Communism. A century after London, the Concert is the European Union and EU diplomacy, and it is the EU's diplomatic reputation and strategic development that the client powers of the Balkans are required to sustain.

1. Re-sitting the exam: patterns of intervention

In 1913, the Powers created an Albania to suit their own interests, as defined by a compromise among themselves: stability of a kind that kept happy both Austria-Hungary (a limit to Serbian expansion) and Italy (a limit to Austro-Hungarian influence, and a potentially comfortable foothold across the Adriatic). The interests of Albania - or, since it is hard to speak meaningfully of a coherent Albania at this point⁴ - of those who had declared Albanian independence were served but indifferently. The declaration of Vlora in 1912 was only secondarily an expression of nationalist desire, and primarily a recognition that the ossifying Ottoman empire no longer offered the Albanians protection from their neighbours. As the events of 1912-1915 showed, independence provided this only when the Powers were prepared to reinforce it with pressure on those neighbours. The 1913 borders meant little to Wilhelm of Wied, whose influence rarely extended much beyond Durres. Zog and Hoxha only defended them by abrogating any interest in Kosovo. Meanwhile, as the short and disrupted reign of Wied showed, the Powers had little thought for the reality on the ground - except when they wished to manipulate it for their own interests.⁵

During the Second World War, the British Special Operations Executive parachuted small numbers of very intrepid soldiers into occupied Albania with the idea that they would encourage latent resistance and thus foster a new threat to the Axis. The conception was both self-centred - as usual, the idea that Albania was simply an adjunct, in this case of the real war in the real

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⁴ As Bernd Fischer has shown, in e.g. *King Zog and the Struggle for Stability in Albania*, East European Monographs 1984, Albania was one of the rare cases where nation followed state.

⁵ Principally Austria and Italy, for example during Wied's first flight in May 1914. The reign, and its shortcomings as an act of intervention, are most vividly covered in *The Six Month Kingdom: Albania 1914*, Heaton-Armstrong, D., ed. Destani, B., London (I.B.Tauris) 2005.

Europe - and misguided: the Albanians of the north wanted to be left alone in their villages (and preferably the nineteenth century); Hoxha in the south was pursuing his own objectives, to which the Axis occupation (and a potential Allied victory) was of limited relevance. The British intervention began in ignorance, and neither caught up with the reality of what was happening on the ground until late, nor produced a decisive policy response to it.⁶

The attempts from 1949 to 1951 by the British Secret Intelligence Service and American Central Intelligence Agency to topple the regime of Enver Hoxha, by infiltrating small parties of Albanian exiles, were a macabre echo of the earlier miscalculations. Again, they were based on a perception that Albania was a side-show of the main event, and on an expectation that the people of Albania wanted to play their part in the latter. The operations misunderstood both the nature of Hoxha's appeal, and the extent of his control, and it was the infiltrated exiles who suffered.⁷

The interventions of the 1990s were more clearly a response to the situation in the region: the emerging horrors of Yugoslavia. However, after the immediate humanitarian aspect of the intervention, the prolonged international engagements were shaped by the attitudes of the interveners (the willingness to recognize Croatia or Kosovo) and hamstrung by the nuances of local politics and society (the persistence of Bosnian Serb defiance, Belgrade's stubbornness, the divisions within Kosovo's Albanians).

Viewed from a Kosovan perspective a century later, the London conclusions establishing Albania have a familiar echo. '...Autonomous, sovereign... The sovereign will be designated by the ... Powers' establishes the essentially colonial arrangement. '4. The control of the civil administration and finances of Albania is to be given over to an International Commission... 5. The powers of this commission will last for ten years and may be extended... 6. The commission will be charged with preparing a draft for the

⁶ Analysed in greater depth in Wilton, R., 'Mice in the pot: international interventions and Balkans realities', in *Albania and the Balkans: Essays in Honour of Sir Reginald Hibbert*, ed. Pettifer, J., Cornwall (Elbow) 2013

⁷ The story is effectively told in *The Great Betrayal*, Bethell, N., London (Hodder&Stoughton) 1984. As in the story of Hoxha and SOE, there is a perception that - just as Albania the side-show exists passively to be used for the interests of the great power intervener - events in Albania can only take a wrong turn through external agency: the perceptions that Hoxha triumphed because the British switched support to him, and that the infiltrations failed because the spy Philby betrayed them. Hoxha triumphed because of the nature of his appeal and strength in the Albania of the time, and the British practical support was negligible in either direction; the infiltrations failed because they were ill-conceived, ill-prepared, ill-executed and easy prey to the Sigurimi.

detailed organisation of all branches of the administration' all sounds like the UN Mission in Kosovo. '8. Public order and security will be assured by the international organisation of a gendarmerie. This organisation will be in the hands of foreign officers who will exercise effective command' sounds like the NATO's KFOR and, more particularly, the European rule of law mission EULEX.⁸

Diplomats have never stopped paraphrasing Bismarck. 'It is exceedingly difficult to get the Powers of Europe, or any of them, to vote money and to use its troops in any cause except one which it feels the interests of its own country absolutely requires', Grey observed in 1913. 'The question of going to war in order to impose peace is always a very doubtful question'.⁹ Despite the hesitation and mis-steps that came first, the interveners of 1995 and 1999 addressed it. The differences and doubts they had suppressed in order to do so only emerged afterwards. In the 1910s and the 1990s, when a multi-ethnic empire collapsed in conflict the great powers approached it with an uncertain blueprint: in the 1910s the idea of borders as tokens of compromise gave way slowly to the idea of borders as markers of ethnic distinction; in the 1990s and thereafter the powers tried to hold to the dream of multi-ethnic cohabitation that was twice lost at Sarajevo.¹⁰

2. Getting the results: lessons of intervention

In each of the interventions, the powers concerned claimed to be acting in a higher, wider, and apparently unimpeachable cause: the defeat of Nazism; the defeat of Communism; the European future. But a number of observations

⁸ The American minister to Greece called the plan 'a marvel of incompetency', an 'absolutely discordant scheme' and 'a jumble of inconsistencies'. (Williams, G.F., 'The Skypetars', Harper's Weekly, April 11 and May 11, (Boston) 1915, quoted in *The Albanians: An Ethnic History from Prehistoric Times to the Present*, Jacques, E., Jefferson North Carolina 1995, p. 336.)

⁹ http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1913/aug/12/war-in-balkans-statement-by-sir-edward#S5CV0056P0_19130812_HOC_336, retrieved November 2013

¹⁰ Recognizing, perhaps, that Wilsonian national self-determination seems clearer from across the Atlantic than it does in heterogenous northern Kosovo, western Macedonia or southern Serbia. A century later, the diplomats are still trying to cut against the subtle grain of the crumbling Habsburg and Ottoman empires.

arise from the natural focus on their own priorities rather than a meaningful engagement with the real currents of interest in the region.

First, it presupposes that the interests of the peoples of the Balkans are merely a subset of the interests of the great powers. This is misguided as well as arrogant. It was not essential that the Balkan peoples pick sides in the Anglo-German naval race. It was not essential for them to pick sides in the second world war, and Enver Hoxha did well by not doing so. The path of EU integration brings stabilization, domestic reforms, and money. But states 10 or 20 years away from EU membership can be forgiven for welcoming the partnership of donors and allies whose support is more immediate and less conditional.

Second, and consequently, the parties in the region will continue to pursue their own interests regardless of the great powers, creating a parallel or conflicting reality. While the Ambassadors were steering negotiations in London in 1913, Serbia and Greece were reaching the agreement that would shape the second Balkan War. For Enver Hoxha, the German occupation that the British wanted him to oppose was a minor inconvenience - and sometimes, indeed, a convenience - while his focus remained building his own power. While the international community in south-eastern Europe is today focused on European ideals, some national leaders in the region pay lip-service to this but have personal priorities.

Thirdly, the diplomats risk simply missing the point. In hastening to solve the immediate threats to stability, the diplomats of 1913 failed to see or could not face the underlying and longer-term challenges. It is a truism to observe that by choosing a diplomatic solution - that is to say, a compromise - to the border of Albania the Conference of Ambassadors defined a century of instability; their successors at Dayton would show a similar and understandable reluctance to seek the big decision. But even leaving aside the Albanian issue, the prompt outbreak of the second Balkan war shows how fragile was their peace. The diplomat's insistence on even-handedness - on equal responsibility, equal fault, equal benefit - is a tempting means of securing an agreement today. But, as was seen in the timid management of the north of Kosovo, it prolongs the tensions and instabilities for tomorrow. The prolonged fragilities of Kosovo are in part the product of fourteen years of failure to finish the job by the international community and, as so often, a focus on immediate stability rather than the underlying challenges and tensions in a society.

Which leads back to 1913. 'Though it is not for me to take up a brief on behalf of a Government that has in the past been notoriously bad,' Sir Mark Sykes commented during the debate on Grey's statement, 'there is one consideration which the House should bear in mind, and that is that there are very few countries which have had such very singular neighbours'.¹¹ Establishing borders seems such a decisive geo-political act, an existential statement in an imperial and Westphalian world. But, particularly in a region where population, information, culture, economy and identity have been and remain so fluid, drawing lines on a map is actually a remarkably futile and irrelevant act, when deeper issues remain unaddressed.

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Robert Wilton is a diplomat, novelist, charity co-founder, translator and student of Balkan affairs. He was advisor to the Prime Minister of Kosova in the lead-up to the country's independence, and acting Head of the OSCE Mission in Albania in 2013. He writes on international intervention - *'Mice in the Pot: international interventions and Balkan realities'* is now out in *Albania and the Balkans: essays in honour of Sir Reginald Hibbert* - and translates Albanian poetry. He is co-founder of The Ideas Partnership NGO, and also the author of the prize-winning Comptrollerate-General series of historical novels (follow @ComptrollerGen)