

Why was Russia interested in the Balkans?

Introduction

This essay analyses Russian foreign policies and motivations in the Balkans. The Balkans is an area of south-eastern Europe. In the time concerned it bordered south-western Russia, southern Austro-Hungary and the north-west of the Ottoman Empire. The time period analysed is that preceding World War One, particularly the early twentieth century. After losing the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5 the Balkans became the predominant area of Russian interest. Yet “Russian involvement with the Balkans has run very deep and developed into a central theme of Russian foreign relations.”¹ Most of the reasons for Russian interest can be divided into three areas: ideological interests; fears internally and of other international actors; and the pursuit or maintenance of power.

It shall be argued that imperialism was of chief import in Russia’s foreign policy decisions prior to World War One (WW1). The main reasons for Russia’s interest did not stem from society and the people. They came from the Government, the Government’s fears and the Government’s desire for power and prestige. But the role played by the people shall firstly be addressed.

¹ Ivo J. Lederer (ed.). 1962. *Russian Foreign Policy, Essays in Historical Perspective*. London: Yale University Press. P.418.

Ideological interests

The argument particularly advanced by Western scholars at the time was that ideas of Pan Slavism and Orthodox unity among the people pressured the Government to take an interest in the Balkans.

There were many Orthodox believers in the Balkans. A majority of Serbia's people (the Balkan country of most interest to Russia prior to WW1) were Orthodox. Treaties with the Ottoman Empire had given Russia rights to protect Orthodox believers within the Ottoman Empire. Some officials and Ministers in government believed this duty should encompass all Orthodox peoples. Danilevskii, a leading theorist of Pan Slavism and Orthodox unity, thought that Russian control of Constantinople would be of great moral advantage as it would become the centre of Orthodoxy from which Russia could exercise influence. "Kireyev was convinced that as the heir of Orthodox Byzantium and as the major Slav state Russia's destiny lay unequivocally in the Balkans. To withdraw from the struggle to unite and lead the Orthodox and Slav cause was to deny Russia's destiny and thus call into question the principles on which the Russian 'church-state' and Russian society rested."² This quote shows how a few people among the elite circles regarded Russia's relations with the Balkans. Jelavich believes that "the major spiritual and cultural connection between Russia and the Balkan people was this religious tie."³ In the twentieth century however, even Jelavich accepts that the Orthodox Church's influence was in decline, and had been since the Crimean War. There were few advocates of Orthodox Unity. Those that did

² Dominic C.B. Lieven. 1983. *Russia and the Origins of the First World War*. London: MacMillan Press Ltd. P22.

³ Barbara Jelavich. 1991. *Russia's Balkan Entanglements, 1806-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P.35.

exist were neither in a position to take foreign policy decisions, nor a particularly strong position to influence those who did.

Ideas of Slavophilism, Pan-Slavism and Neo-Slavism were of greater influence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These ideas saw Russian people as one part of a Slavic people. They advocated unity or at least co-operation with all Slavic peoples. Pan-Slavic ideas certainly increased Russian interest in the Balkans as the Balkans was the largest area of Slavs outside of Russia. Indeed, Russia had intervened partly for Pan-Slavic reasons in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877. There were many scholars e.g. Bakunin and Danilevskii, merchants e.g. textile magnate P.P. Riabushinskii, members of the press, and members of government e.g. Octobrists (a political party on the Duma (Russian Parliament)), who pushed for action in the area for these reasons. Gatrell believes such advocates only “echoed the widespread view among the middle class that Russia had a mission to act in Europe on behalf of fellow Slavs.”⁴ There is some truth in this. Pan-Slavic ideas originated outside of Russia and were held by many elites in the middle and upper classes. But the Russian Middle Class was small. It had little power. Marx echoed the perceived popularity and power of Pan-Slavism at the time when he said “Pan-Slavism is now, from a creed, turned into a political programme, or rather a vast political menace, with 800,000 bayonets to support it.”⁵ However, the larger part of Russia’s population was neither interested nor often even aware of these Pan-Slavic ideas. More the eighty percent of the population were peasants. Peasants were usually more interested in practical day to day matters and lacked education on ideas such as these.

⁴ Peter Gatrell. 1994. *Government, Industry & Rearmament in Russia, 1900-1914, the last argument of tsarism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P.263.

⁵ Karl Marx in Eleanor Marx Aveling and Edward Aveling (eds.). 1897. *The Eastern Question*. London: Swan Sonnenschein.

Foreign policy decisions were not representative however. They fell largely into the hands of two men: the Foreign Minister (Sazanov at the beginning of WW1) and the Tsar (Nicholas Romanov II at the same time). Neither of these men, nor many of their predecessors, was strongly Pan-Slavic. But they were more strongly influenced by the elites than the peasantry, who they were politically out of touch with. Hence it may have seemed that Pan-Slavism was an interest of national import, particularly in 1877, 1908 and 1912. In 1877 members of the Government managed to raise money and a voluntary force of 5000 for a Pan-Slavic cause. In 1908 and 1912 there were uproars over the Tsarist stance toward fellow Slavs in the Balkans.

However, moments of public support for Pan-Slavism and Orthodox Unity were always brief and relatively small. “Nicholas [Romanov] had always been much more interested in Constantinople and the Straits [a narrow choke point between the Turkish and Greek coasts] than in the Balkan Slavs.”⁶ Hosking and Service agree, stating that Pan-Slavism was not a real force. “Nor was Pan-Slavism acceptable to practical politics inside Russia itself.”⁷ This statement goes too far however. Orthodox and Slavic ideas did raise Russian interest in the Balkans. But few Tsars or Foreign Ministers in the century before WW1 would have marked unity with the people of the Balkans high on a list of priorities. It was not realistic to pursue the policy due to fears over the stance of international powers and possibilities of a second revolution. Fears in Government played a much larger role than ideological factors alone.

⁶ Dominic Lieven. 1994. *Nicholas II Emperor of all the Russias*. London: Cambridge University Press. P.196.

⁷ Geoffrey Hosking and Robert Service (eds.). 1998. *Russian Nationalism Past and Present*. New York: Palgrave. P.27.

Fears

After a revolution in 1905 and severe unrest in the Russo-Japanese War, which continued for some years, there were heightened fears of a second revolution. “From 1905 to 1914 Russian officials were in constant fear that their actions would lead to another upheaval.”⁸ Tsar Nicholas II furthered this possibility by slowly reversing reforms granted in the revolution. Geyer believes “Russian nationalism deflected these [internal] fears outward, projected them onto ancient enemies and directed them towards traditional desires”⁹ such as the acquisition of power in the Balkans. Geyer drew on German theories regarding the political consequences of modernisation, connecting internal instabilities in a causal relationship with foreign policy. His argument compares well too that of many Soviet historians. Both tend to see clashes between autocratic state power and civil society as the source of instability and fear. McDonald is also among the strongest proponents of the argument that Russian interest was caused by domestic factors.¹⁰ The pursuit of power in the Balkans became a solution to fears stemming from internal instabilities. Tsar Nicholas II believed that active and successful foreign policy could distract people from poor conditions at home, and lost pride from previous wars. It motivated intervention in the Russo-Japanese War and interest in the Balkans.

There were even greater fears on the international stage however. Since the Ottoman Empire withdrew from parts of the Balkans there had been a vacuum of power,

⁸ Barbara Jelavich. 1991. *Russia's Balkan Entanglements, 1806-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P.207.

⁹ Dietrich Geyer. 1987. *Russian Imperialism, The interaction of domestic and foreign policy 1860-1914*. Leamington Spa: Berg Publishers Ltd. P.345.

¹⁰ David McDonald in Hugh Ragsdale (ed.). 1993. *Imperial Foreign Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P273.

drawing the surrounding powers in. The Ottoman Empire, Russia, Austro-Hungary and Germany all competed for power. Russia particularly feared what might happen if the Central Powers (Germany and Austro-Hungary) improved their strength in the region. For Russia could not afford to allow the Central Powers more power on the Russian border. The growing perception of Russian weakness after a series of military disasters ensured she had even more interest in preventing the Central Powers becoming stronger. Indeed, it was Austrian action in Bosnia in 1908, not internal drives, that compelled Russian strategists to restate their longstanding interests in the region. In *Russia and the origins of the First World War* Lieven makes frequent references to Russian fears of Austria and Germany. He describes an “Austrophobia”¹¹ in leading diplomats such as Hartwig.

Russia feared the expansion of the Turkish fleet, which she learnt of in spring 1909. She feared Austrian annexation of Slavic countries (such as that of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908) she was perceived by her people and internationally, to have a duty to protect. She had “fear that, unless humoured, their Balkan clients would go over to the enemy camp.”¹² A Pan-Slavic regime came to power in Serbia in the early twentieth century seeking Russian patronage. “Only Serbia could be counted on as reliably in the Russian camp”¹³. In the atmosphere of 1914 Russia needed as many allies as she could, and so her interests in preserving this ally were great. She feared “German influence in Constantinople increased. The Russian officials had now to fear that they would meet German military power not only on their western border, but

¹¹ Dominic C.B. Lieven. 1983. *Russia and the Origins of the First World War*. London: MacMillan Press Ltd. P42.

¹² Ibid. P40.

¹³ Robert H. Johnson. 1977. *Tradition Versus Revolution, Russia and the Balkans in 1917*. New York: East European Quarterly. Boulder. P.11.

also at the Straits and in the Near East.”¹⁴ But most of all she feared for her own survival, her prestige, and her ability to keep expanding. Russia perceived the Central Power’s growth in the region to be a threat to both her future growth, and position as a great power. The Congress of Paris in 1856; the Congress of Berlin in 1878; military failures in 1856, 1877 and 1904-5; and weak diplomatic positions in 1908 and 1912 all combined to severely harm Russia’s position as a great power, and further her fears. Her prestige was lower than her ability as a great power justified.

Fear heightened Russian interest. The Balkans was both a source of fear and a possible solution to the causes of fear. If their influence in the Balkans could be improved the expansion of other major powers in the region could be prevented and Russian prestige rescued. Similar fears were held by all the major powers due to a lack of transparency and culture of imperialism. A security dilemma was created, whereby each distrusted the other’s aims and sought to prevent their domination, hence heightening tensions and thereby interest. These fears were a significant factor influencing interest in the Balkans. Both Tsar Nicholas II and his Foreign Minister Sazonov thought success on the international stage was no longer wanted but necessary to alleviate these fears.

However few scholars attribute much import to this factor instead focussing largely on what could be labelled a power argument. The fact that Russia was prepared to pursue an independent Balkan League reflected the fears that Russia had over Austria and Germany’s ability to claim the area. Yet even the decision to back a Balkan League would have ceded Russia great amounts of power. For although fears fostered

¹⁴ Barbara Jelavich. 1991. *Russia’s Balkan Entanglements, 1806-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P.205.

Russian interest in the Balkans, there was a reason why the solution of Tsars and Foreign Ministers tended to be to claim more power.

Imperialism: The pursuit or maintenance of Power

Some scholars believe Russia was less imperialistic than other major powers at the time. Sarkisyanz implies this in *Russian Imperialism from Ivan the Great to the Revolution*¹⁵. This was certainly not true however. Russia simply advocated imperialistic actions close to her border rather than in the form of colonies. “The policy of Russia is changeless [...] Its methods, its tactics, its manoeuvres, may change, but the polar star of its policy – world domination – is a fixed star.”¹⁶ Russia fostered different cultures and ideas in different regions and classes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The culture known by Tsar Nicholas II and his conservative Ministers was very much imperialistic and outward looking¹⁷. The Balkans were perceived to be the only valuable land still up for grabs in Europe, and after failure in the Far East options for expansion had been reduced. Further power in the Balkans would be strategically/militarily and economically advantageous for Russia.

Jelavich¹⁸, Lederer¹⁹ and Gatrell downplay the import of economics in raising Russian interest in the Balkans. “Economic considerations played only a modest part in the

¹⁵ Emanuel Sarkisyanz in Taras Hunczak (ed.). 1974. *Russian Imperialism from Ivan the Great to the Revolution*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press. P.238.

¹⁶ Karl Marx in Taras Hunczak. (ed.). 1974. *Russian Imperialism from Ivan the Great to the Revolution*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press. P.1.

¹⁷ Dominic C.B. Lieven. 1983. *Russia and the Origins of the First World War*. London: MacMillan Press Ltd. P.22.

¹⁸ Barbara Jelavich. 1991. *Russia's Balkan Entanglements, 1806-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P.267.

formation of this sentiment.”²⁰ But the facts say differently. Those who advocate economics as among the prime causes such as Vinogradov are closer to the truth. “The Russian autocracy’s expansionist impulse was predominantly political and economic in character.”²¹ Though the Balkans proper was economically dominated by other major powers, the Straits in particular were of huge import. Russia was an agricultural economy and the Straits were vitally important to her agricultural exports. Social and economic harm caused by closures of the Straits in 1912 and 1913 proved this to Russia. Economic security in the Straits would have vastly increased Russian power and both Tsar Nicholas II and Sazonov knew this. However economic power was not all that Russia pursued. “Russia’s aim had been to dominate the Balkans and the Turkish Straits for strategic, ideological, and economic reasons.”²² MacKenzie is accurate in specifying a wide range of interests. Russia pursued not only economic power but prestige and military/strategic power.

The Russo-Japanese War had necessitated greater support from the Russian Balkan fleet than was available. This might have been available had Russia had control, or at least agreement providing the passage of Russian warships through the Straits. Army chiefs used incidents such as this, and later Balkan troubles to influence members of government. MacKenzie²³ and Lederer emphasise Russia’s pursuit of military/strategic power, particularly at the Straits. “Tsarist leaders viewed south-eastern Europe as essential to Russian national security and the stability of Russia’s

¹⁹ Ivo J. Lederer (ed.). 1962. *Russian Foreign Policy, Essays in Historical Perspective*. London: Yale University Press. P.419.

²⁰ Peter Gatrell. 1994. *Government, Industry & Rearmament in Russia, 1900-1914, the last argument of tsarism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P.263.

²¹ V.N. Vinogradov in Hugh Ragsdale (ed.). 1993. *Imperial Foreign Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P161.

²² David MacKenzie in Hugh Ragsdale (ed.). 1993. *Imperial Foreign Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P220.

²³ Ibid. P.220.

frontiers in Europe.”²⁴ Russia’s Balkan Sea Fleet was the only fleet with the ability to sail all year round. Russian fleets in the Baltic and Far East were landlocked through the winter by ice. Russia was therefore interested in the Balkans militarily to gain permanent access to the Turkish Straits. This access would allow quick naval offensive access and stop enemies bottling the Russian fleet in the Black Sea.

Although Russia was the fastest growing economy in the world in the years immediately preceding WW1 there was a perception of declining power. As a strong power in the early twentieth century she had the capabilities, self-confidence and hunger to expand. A loss of power, even if this was only perceived power or prestige, was totally unacceptable. Johnson believes prestige “was uppermost in the minds of the two irresolute men whose decisions would count the most.”²⁵ As covered in the previous section, Russia feared being seen as weak. Her prestige had suffered in 1908 and 1912 when Russia was seen backing down before a stronger Germany. Russia believed that if she abandoned Serbia to Austrian aggression her survival as an equal to other Great Powers would be forfeited and she would lose all respect on the world stage. Geyer and McDonald also state prestige as the chief cause of Russian interest in the Balkans. “As Geyer argues, Russia did go to war in defence of prestige.”²⁶ Russian prestige had been severely harmed over the previous decades and Tsar Nicholas II wanted to pursue more.

²⁴ Ivo J. Lederer (ed.). 1962. *Russian Foreign Policy, Essays in Historical Perspective*. London: Yale University Press. P.418-9.

²⁵ Robert H. Johnson. 1977. *Tradition Versus Revolution, Russia and the Balkans in 1917*. New York: East European Quarterly. Boulder. P.11.

²⁶ David M. McDonald in Hugh Ragsdale (ed.). 1993. *Imperial Foreign Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P310.

Russia's Tsars wanted greater power. The rate of growth in between 1907 and 1914 seemed to provide a logical argument that Russia had the right too, and should expand. This logic was one which marked the time. Both Germany and Russia believed they had the right to seek power due to the international culture and atmosphere of imperialism prominent among ruling European elites.

Conclusion

The Balkans (specifically Constantinople and the Straits) was the region of most interest to Russia. Yet neither the Balkans themselves, nor the Russian people were the chief drive behind the interest. Fear and power was.

Ideologies, specifically Slavic sympathies, increased Russian interest in the Balkans a great deal. However these ideas were only held by the middle and upper classes in Russia, and the ruling elites in Serbia. Their support never engulfed a majority of Russian society and was not of huge import to Tsar Nicholas II or his two previous Foreign Ministers prior to WW1.

Tsar Nicholas II and Foreign Minister Sazonov looked enviously toward the power held by Western European states. They were fearful that Russia was not able to stand toe to toe with the Central Powers and were interested in the Balkans as it was an arena where she could fight the Central Power's growing strength. Russia's fears were more significant in fostering Russian interest in the Balkans than ideologies and were closely linked with her imperialism.

The most important reason for Russia's interest was imperialism. Russia wanted to prevent a further loss of power and prestige in particular. She was economically growing, and wanted to do the same on the world stage. She had sought power in the Far East and failed. After 1908 she was recovering and felt able to pursue this power in the Balkans. Russia wanted to consolidate power in her own country and in Serbia. She wanted to consolidate on her economic and military power in the Straits. She also wished to gain more geo-political power. But the Balkans was considered to be both the only land available to acquiesce and the most fruitful due to the hunger for Constantinople and the Straits. Hence Russia's main reason for interest in the Balkans was imperialism, the pursuit of power and most significantly growing fears that she must fight to preserve and expand her crumbling prestige (which was perceived as power).

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