Introduction

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The Balkans are commonly associated with backwardness. Why not with forwardness? There are good reasons to see the region and its constituent states as precursors of events in western Europe. Although the region, in the modern period, was less industrialized than much of the rest of Europe, the politicians and publics of the Balkans contemplated and even anticipated larger political trends.1

Although the honor of being the first nation-state is usually accorded to France, it is perhaps more just to treat Serbia and Greece as the first genuine nation-states. The political ideas of the early Balkan nation builders, especially among the Serbs, were not diluted by enlightened imperialism of the Napoleonic variety. The nation-states that emerged in the Balkans in the 1820s were a model for Europe, and then for the world, precisely because they were inherently adaptable and pluralistic. For example, Serbs did not propose that Serbian ideas were right for Europe and the world, but rather that what Serbs had done, others might do. The Greek model associated national revolution with both Romanticism and classicism, so that Europeans who supported Greeks against the Ottoman Empire could believe they were taking part in a universal project of liberation. These first Balkan unifications preceded the Italian and German ones by roughly half a century—hence our proposition that the historian studying European nation-states must start first with the Balkans and only then seek echoes farther west. The Italian unification, like the Greek, involved a confusion of the individual and the collective: The liberation of the nation was conceived as the liberation of a national person, principled and worthy of emulation. The German unification was more like the Serbian, its claims generally limited to those of power and folk, not universal principles. Later, in the 1920s, the Balkan model of statehood was applied
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throughout eastern Europe as a result of the settlements made following the First World War.²

The national revolutions in the Balkans did not prejudge which nations were coherent and which would gain statehood, but they did provide a model, one that is known in other, non-European, historical settings as anti-imperial or anti-colonial. The integration of Balkan nation-states, a process that began in the early nineteenth century, had to and did involve the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. The further national integration of European territory—the Italian and German unifications, in the third quarter of the nineteenth century—had to and did weaken the Habsburg monarchy. When, in 1914, Serbia turned against the Habsburgs, all of Europe went to war, motivated in considerable measure by nationalism. The relationship between the Ottoman Empire and the national movements, and then the relationships between the older European empires and the newly sovereign Balkan states, can be understood precisely in terms that are usually reserved for discussions of global history: colonialism and anticolonialism. The Balkan states made claims against the Ottoman Empire for their independence that became familiar from the anticolonial movements of the twentieth century: the authenticity of local culture, the economic opportunities of sovereignty, the need for global recognition as a sovereign equal. The First World War was an anti-imperial war in which empires fought on both sides and after which some empires imposed anti-imperial settlements on others. Land empires—which could be touched directly by the logic of self-determination of their constituent parts—all came to an end. The logic that brought them down, however, would be extended in the twentieth century to the powers that won the First World War, which is to say to the rest of the world. In this way Balkan history exposes and breaks down the implied artificial barrier between Europe and the rest of the world, or between North and South, that defines today’s discussions of post-colonialism and of global history generally.³

In 2011 and 2014, under the rubric “The Balkans as Europe,” an international group of scholars gathered at the Institute of Human Sciences (Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen), an independent institute in Vienna, for a series of workshops. The goal was not to consider our own discourses of Balkan backwardness as a European phenomenon. This has already been done, splendidly and in different ways, by leaders of the field such as Maria Todorova and Larry Wolff.⁴ The goal was rather to reverse the field, to consider politics rather than discourse, and actors in the Balkans as forward-looking agents rather than as subjects of retrospective discussions. This volume, which collects six papers presented at these workshops and then revised, provides good reason to think that a sustained effort from these premises might
be fruitful for historians who aim to make sense of Europe as a whole, or to place European history within a global framework.

These scholarly works demonstrate that from the beginning of the national period of Balkan history, the national has also been the European and the global. It is possible to see European history not just as a competition between nations and empires but as a field of projects of integration and disintegration—of course, integration from one perspective means disintegration from another. At a historical moment when the future of the current project of European integration is in doubt, this lesson from the Balkans is apposite. The shattering of large, durable economic units in the name of unachievable sovereignty might after all be the way of the future as well the past.

At the crucial moment of Balkan state formation, in the late nineteenth century, it was necessary to consider global economics and politics. If state sovereignty in every case involves the attempted control of human beings defined as subjects of the state, then the mass emigration from Europe during the first globalization of the late nineteenth century must have been considered a threat to the sovereignty of the states the emigrants left behind. Interestingly, as Ulf Brunnbauer demonstrates in his study of Balkan reactions to the issue of emigration, political leaders reacted to the brute fact of emigration from southeastern Europe to North America in different ways, depending upon how they understood the relationship between their own polity and the world system.5

At this time, Austria-Hungary was the most important and largest polity in the region. After 1867, when a constitutional compromise known as the Ausgleich devolved powers to the Hungarian and Cisleithanian (Austrian) halves, it was a dual monarchy, in which almost all matters of domestic policy were decided separately in Vienna and in Budapest. Both parts of the Dual Monarchy extended into the Balkans. Broadly speaking, Cisleithania (the “Austrian” part) was not governed as a nation-state, but rather as a liberal and democratizing empire where national problems were to be resolved by concessions from the center. For this reason, perhaps, the general approach to emigration was that of an open door. The Kingdom of Hungary, by contrast, was governed as a national state of the Hungarians, who were a plurality but not a majority in the territory. Consequently, Hungary did have policies to restrict emigration, although these seem to have made no difference in quantitative terms. It is, however, interesting to note that the people who did leave Hungary were for the most part members of the Slavic-speaking minorities. Whether by design or accident, emigration made Hungary more Hungarian.
In Serbia, the classic example of a new nation-state, authorities managed to arrange matters so that more people came to the country than left it. This had an obvious logic in a state that was consistently militaristic and kept a large number of men under arms. Between 1880 and 1890 Serbia witnessed a net immigration of about fifty thousand people, some of them Slavs from Austria-Hungary. Thus, even in a period without war in which emigration was largely trans-Atlantic, a certain amount of ethnic unmixing was taking place, and by design: Slavs were encouraged to immigrate to Serbia.

In Greece an entirely different policy was followed. Greek authorities understood the Greek nation to be a global nation, so they did not see emigration as a net loss. In intellectual terms, this meant that Greek leaders’ image of the Greek people required thinking of them, both at home and abroad, as still members of the Greek nation. This was true in all of the other cases as well. The very concept of ethnicity, Brunnbauer maintains, developed as a result of contemplating the emigration of co-nationals to faraway places, especially the United States. If states wished to maintain cultural, political, and financial relationships with emigrants, they required terms to identify “their own” people who lived in a different polity. This was the idea of the ethnic nation. Thus the domestic project of building a nation works in an uninterrupted continuity with the foreign policy of protecting a nation. This is true whether the story is one of national death through assimilation or national health through trade. Either way, the local citizen is imagined abroad in ethnic terms.

As Holly Case reveals, this particular overlap of foreign and domestic policy was but one aspect of a larger diplomatic transformation that began in the Balkans, in which the textbook idea of sovereignty yielded, no later than the early nineteenth century, to policies designed to alter the societies of other states. Her argument requires that two dominant structures of the history of international relations be considered anew. The first is the Treaty of Westphalia, which established the principle of modern state sovereignty and is thus regarded as ideal-typical for theorists of international relations. As Case recalls, Westphalia embodied a principle of mutual recognition of sovereignty among Christian European regimes, and thus excluded the Ottoman Empire. This meant not only that unequal treaties (“capitulations”) between Christian and non-Christian nations were legitimate but also that Christian powers understood the Ottoman border as a permeable membrane through which instances of their own sovereignty could intrude, establish themselves, and act.

The second notion that must be set aside, then, is the idea of nineteenth-century foreign policy as a great game of a few elite statesmen, mummified by the archaic rules of their own creation. Instead, the territory of the Ottoman
Empire provided an arena where a very large number of diplomats of the lowest rank—the consuls of other states—could reinvent diplomacy as social policy abroad. These consuls had the power to bestow citizenship, which means that they created whole groups of people on Ottoman territory with a claim to protection by a foreign state—as early as 1808 some 120,000 Greeks in the Ottoman Empire were protected by the Russian Empire. By altering Ottoman society in this way, the consuls were creating the justifications for further interventions on Ottoman territory, up to and including war. In other words, what Case calls the “consular revolution” was the beginning of European practices that are familiar from a later period, such as the defense of supposedly oppressed ethnic minorities. Case demonstrates the conceptual and personal continuities between these Balkan practices and the diplomacy of the first half of the twentieth century in Europe generally.

The Balkan nation-states can themselves be seen as a product of this consular revolution, and their policies are a response to its particular structures and possibilities. They were, after all, usually created with the support of one Christian empire or another, in part because leaders in London, St. Petersburg, or, later, Berlin believed that such states would bolster the imperial order. If the Ottoman Empire was to decline, its disintegration should be managed, so went the reasoning of the great powers, so that major conflict is avoided and the interests of powerful neighbors are more or less balanced. Thus, distant diplomats, whatever their public rhetoric, in no way regarded the Balkan national revolutions as expositions of perfect sovereignty against the backdrop of Ottoman repression. On the contrary, they regarded the new states as clients that would balance other clients. So the great powers at first negotiated unequal treaties with the Balkan states, or imposed their own understandings without the presence of interlocutors from the states concerned—for example, the 1878 Treaty of Berlin, which among other things established the de facto independence of Bulgaria under Ottoman rule. The “capitulations” that the great powers had extracted from the Ottoman Empire were extended to the new states that were established on its territory. The leaders of these new states thus took two things for granted: that it was natural for states to impose their own interests by working within the societies of other states, and that full sovereignty meant some sort of equalization of these influences between the empires and the nations.

The Balkan nation-states would therefore practice this kind of “consular” foreign policy against one another, the Ottoman Empire, and, finally, against Austria-Hungary. Their leaders would tend to conflate—as Dessislava Lilova and Roumiana Preshlenova demonstrate on the crucial example of
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Bulgaria—the quest for full sovereignty with the content of domestic policy. Lilova makes the case that the definition of the Bulgarian nation arose in response precisely to the perception that the national territory was being explored and surveyed for exploitation by foreigners. She writes of the perception of a “deluge of foreign travelers” in the 1860s and a rhetoric of colonization in the 1870s. Bulgarian national activists believed that they must organize knowledge about their own homeland as a matter of self-defense. Maps would clothe the nation, demonstrating that the inhabitants of Bulgarian lands were not savages to be used by empires but a European people that must be treated as such. Geography seemed like the proper mode to make such arguments, Lilova argues, because its putative neutrality made its assertions seem irrefutable. At the simplest level, maps that had already been drawn by others could be enhanced with the inclusion of Bulgarian locales, written with Bulgarian orthography. Once new maps were created, they could provide the basis for statistical categories, such as population, which could then in turn become national symbols or arguments. Bulgarians preferred to make their case on the “principle of statistical majority,” writes Lilova, rather than by reference to ancient history. The “priority of geography over history” seemed to be a defense of Bulgarian claims against those not only of imperialists from Europe but also of local competitors such as the Greeks. Interestingly, this entire campaign took place on writing desks: The Bulgarian intellectuals, although they called for journeys through the “terra incognita” of their own country, did not actually undertake the journeys themselves.

Likewise, in the 1860s and 1870s the Bulgarian conversation about the national economy did not distinguish between external and internal considerations. As Preshlenova argues, Bulgarian activists assumed that the abolition of Ottoman rule would automatically relieve the economic backwardness inherent in that rule. The Treaty of Berlin of 1878 had recognized the autonomy of Bulgaria, but within geographical borders that seemed unsatisfactorily restrictive to an intelligentsia preoccupied with maps, and without the formal sovereignty that might have marked a complete break with the Ottoman past. As a result, Preshlenova shows, the debate about the national economy then became identical with the debate about the achievement of full sovereignty. There was a national consensus for militarism—and thus high military budgets—as an investment in future gains of land. Meanwhile, Bulgarian politicians worked to remove what they understood as the archaic limitations on trade policy imposed at Berlin. Between 1879 and 1905 Bulgaria succeeded in regrounding its economic relations with foreign powers on the basis of reciprocal treaties. By the time Bulgaria declared its independence in 1908, the
government was moving toward a full complement of economic ministries, and electoral debates included economic issues. The basic faith in militarism, however, was constant. Bulgaria joined Greece, Macedonia, and Serbia in forming the Balkan League to wage the First Balkan War in 1912, against the Ottoman Empire, to gain more land.8

In his reconsideration of what has been called the Serbian “Golden Age,” 1903 to 1914, John Paul Newman brings home the point that Balkan militarism, on display in its purest form during that period, could serve as a general model and could change the course of European history. Already a century before the First World War, most able-bodied Serbian men had been fighting in the national revolution. Over the entire course of the existence of the Serbian state, its government was able to keep an impressively high percentage of its men under arms. In the First Balkan War, the Serbian army sent four hundred thousand men into the field. Serbia was an extreme example of the conflation of foreign and domestic policy, in that prosperity was always assumed to be a matter of controlling land that belonged to someone else: a rival nation-state such as Bulgaria, the Ottoman Empire, or Austria-Hungary.

Likewise, the Serbs were pioneers in a certain modern form of the “consular revolution,” whereby they used or rather inspired national questions abroad to provoke neighbors and create the conditions for war. The assassination of Franz Ferdinand was the result of a very large number of such plots. As Newman recounts, these were the work of conspiracies within the state rather than of the state itself. In a polity legitimated by territorial growth, there was always room for disagreement about the correct means to pursue that expansion and a natural discord between civilian authorities who might want to integrate territory and military authorities who favored quick exploitation of its resources. As Newman shows, the Golden Age revealed rather than resolved these problems. Victory in the Balkan Wars brought political strife over the control of new territory, and the sense of national unity brought by triumph did not hinder yet another war in 1914—this time one that would bring in Europe, and the world. Interesting in this light is that Serbia won the First World War in two senses: It was on the side of the ultimate victors, and the victors exported the model of the nation-state northward to the rest of central and eastern Europe. Indeed, by the end of the First World War, the idea of self-determination was championed by most of the parties: not only by Woodrow Wilson and the Entente powers, but also by the Germans at Brest-Litovsk and the Bolsheviks under Vladimir Lenin. In this way, Balkan models contributed to the emergence of a new world order.
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Did leaders and activists in the Balkans know that they were amplifying and accelerating trends of European and global history, or is this framework of “forwardness” an abstraction imposed from the outside? In her consideration of two moments from the intellectual history of Dalmatia, Dominique Reill suggests that people in the Balkans were fully aware of the various reciprocities, and sought to understand and exploit them. Unlike Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece, Dalmatia was not an independent state, but rather a maritime district of Austria-Hungary, on the eastern shores of the Adriatic. Its economic debates, which she tracks through its chamber of commerce, were thus about relationships between a periphery and a center. Even so, as she shows, they were strikingly global in scope.

When arguing for the elimination of tariffs, Dalmatian businessmen and journalists looked to the example of Algeria and France. They were fully aware, as the journalism of the time demonstrates, that Algeria had been joined to France by way of a bloody colonial war. Nevertheless they could and did seize upon the form of economic agreements between Paris and its new North African départements, which was that of a reciprocal reduction of trade barriers between nominally equal parties. Interestingly, the obsession with reciprocity, so evident in the relationships between new Balkan states and old empires, appeared at that time in internal discussions within Austria.

Reill’s second example of global perspective, the invention of the universal translation system known as Pangrafia, reveals a keen understanding of the deeper problems of global political economy as reflected in “language politics.” Larger political entities seeking to consolidate imperial territory for economic integration would tend to impose one working language for purposes of trade and administration, with or without implying an attendant cultural chauvinism. In the Austrian Empire this language was German, but it was spoken well only by a minority of the empire’s subjects. In Dalmatian or Istrian trade it might be Italian, which would place speakers of Croatian or Slovenian at a disadvantage. World trade would require the use of world languages, such as English, French, or Russian. In all cases, the speakers of smaller languages, even though taken together they formed a numerical majority in a region, empire, or of the world, would be forced into a position of subordination, which might encourage nationalism and rebellion. How then to have modernization without humiliation, efficiency without marginalization? A universal system of translation would allow everyone in an imperial or in the world economy to participate as equals. The project, though it was never endorsed or implemented, reveals rather deep insight into the nature of some of the core problems of modernity.
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Reill’s two examples can only be suggestive, but they are powerfully so: The Balkans were European and global not just in the unintended consequences of their political innovations but also in the frameworks of thought that lay behind them. This is a disturbing conclusion for those of us who might wish to think that writing or thinking in global abstractions automatically resolves political or intellectual problems; but for those attempting a plausible European or global history the Balkans might be a useful place to start. One way to write European or global history, after all, is to begin from a region such as the Balkans, not only where the grander levels of historical causality were understood and manipulated, but also where important concepts—the nation-state and anticolonialism—were invented.

Notes

1. This research agenda extends and unites some suggestions made in Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 1999), and Mark Mazower, *The Balkans: A Short History* (New York: Modern Library, 2000).


5. Ulf Brunnbauer, *Globalizing Southeastern Europe: Emigrants, America, and the State since the Late Nineteenth Century* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), unites a series of focused local studies with a long temporal range.


8. For a sense of what Greeks lost by separation from the Ottoman Empire, see Gerasimos Augustinos, *The Greeks of Asia Minor: Confession, Community,*
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