‘The actual beginning of the great Balkan war is felt here to be a moment of historical solemnity. Whatever its course, it must radically change the situation.’ *The Times*, reporting from Vienna on 17 October 1912.[[1]](#footnote-1)

On 28 September 1911, Italian land and naval forces launched several attacks on the Ottoman dependency of Libya. The expectation in Rome was of a lightening campaign, which would neutralise the sparsely defended Ottoman territories in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, annexing these provinces into Italy’s Empire before the end of the year. What Italy managed instead was to instigate a year-long crisis. In this forgotten war between the weakest of the two great powers, contemporaries watched as guns fired across North Africa, the Adriatic, Aegean, Ionian and Dardanelles. Many feared the imminent collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and the sharks circled to take advantage.[[2]](#footnote-2) Indeed, Italy accelerated Ottoman decline, as revealed in the recognition by the new Balkan states of Serbia, Bulgaria, Montenegro and Greece that the best opportunity of expansion at Constantinople’s expense had arrived. The Balkan Wars began in October 1912, as peace negotiations were ongoing between Italy and the Turks. If the act of surrendering a Muslim Arab state to Catholic Italy was unpalatable, the prospect of losing its Balkan territories, and thus losing its European status, compelled the Young Turk regime to prioritise the newer conflict. All this was too little too late. The Turks lost Libya and vast portions of the Balkans to the new nation states, leaving them emboldened and expansionist, while the great powers scrambled to maintain some semblance of stability.

Perhaps the only power more directly affected by these events than the Ottoman Empire was the self-appointed watchdog of the Balkans: Austria-Hungary. Since the annexation of Bosnia Herzegovina in 1908, Vienna had attempted to consolidate its power in the region, with the goal of serving as a beacon for disaffected Slavs under their banner and outside of it. But this experience of Balkan rule was far from satisfactory. Progress was immensely slow, and the Hungarians consistently refused to approve funds from their budget to prop up the new Habsburg regime in Sarajevo. Increasingly, the aftermath of the Annexation Crisis was proving to be more of a curse than a blessing. While a diplomatic victory for the Central Powers on the surface, a few years later the prize was eroding Habsburg finances and patience. Hostility towards Serbia was now a given in Habsburg policy, and the eruption of the Balkan Wars threatened to once again upend the status quo. Should Serbia increase its size and power, however, this imperative of Austrian policy would become even more urgent, and potentially catastrophic for European peace.

This episode will consider these events, beginning with the Italian act, to build a narrative of increasing tension, competition and mistrust before 1914. When stories of the First World War is told, they often begins in 1914, but I would argue that we cannot understand the decisions made by contemporaries, or the assumptions they held, unless we first set the context of 1911-1913. The effects of this period were transformative; indeed, it is difficult to understate just how central these events were to the events of 1914. That said, neither the Italian invasion of Libya nor the Balkan Wars made the First World War inevitable. In fact, they contained increasing intervention by Anglo-German diplomacy, suggesting that the great powers could cooperate towards the common goal of peace. Yet, on the other hand, the armaments of the great powers were greatly enhanced in the period immediately following 1911. Contemporaries wondered at the risks of this formidable standoff, but behind the scenes statesmen found even greater cause for concern. Despite the cohesion of the powers within their alliance blocs, no power trusted their partners entirely. It was known that each sought to arrive at arrangements which would benefit them, even if this involved going behind the backs of their allies, and reaching compromises that would disadvantage those allies. The 1878 Treaty of Berlin was effectively defunct, but the powers were now animated by a new foreign policy imperative: nationality.

In recognition of this trend, in the period immediately after March 1909, the great powers began to stick their heads above the parapet of their alliance blocs with increasing regularity. In early 1909, France and Germany reached a compromise over Moroccan commercial rights. In October 1909, Italy and Russia – despite being parties to opposing alliance blocs – signed an accord which stipulated the mutual preservation of the Balkan status quo. Surprisingly, in November 1910 Russia signed a similar agreement with Germany, and this was followed up in August 1911 with a more wide-ranging accord concerning the mutual acceptance of one another’s railway schemes. Implicit in these agreements – and sometimes stated explicitly – was the intention of constraining Austria-Hungary, and ensuring that she did not act as provocatively as she had before. We can get some idea of what Vienna thought of these actions by its allies by looking at the reaction to the meeting between the Tsar and Kaiser at Potsdam in 1910. For a time, *Potsdam* became the new Austrian byword for German betrayal, and the German Chancellor did intimate to St Petersburg that if Vienna attempted another such expansionist policy, Berlin would restrain her. Concerns were raised in London that Russia was slipping out of the Entente through these initiatives, and that she was not so reliable a partner as once assumed.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Second Moroccan Crisis – erupting in the early summer of 1911 and lasting till a Franco-German treaty in November – represented yet another escalation of the alliance system, this time instigated by France. From this crisis came a new thrust of German policy – the rapid expansion of the army through unprecedented increases in a controversial Army Bill. The French reciprocated, returning the Franco-German rivalry to the centre of European politics, alongside the Austro-Russian confrontation in the Balkans. In October 1911, another high-profile meeting between Kaiser Wilhelm and Tsar Nicholas suggested a further adjustment to the alliance system, but private considerations also played a role. The Russians were irritated at France’s uninspired support during the Bosnian Annexation Crisis, and the insistence that the alliance with France was a defensive agreement seemed like a perfect snub. Austian Foreign Minister Count Aehrenthal was also clear that the alliance with Germany did not extend to North Africa. In short, the Second Moroccan Crisis both exacerbated great power tensions and reduced trust and security within the respective blocs. Contemporaries talked increasingly of a great apocalyptic war between all of Europe’s powers; diplomacy settled into a game of chicken, where powers tested one another’s mettle to gain prestige; armaments increased, resulting in a spiralling arms race which was as dangerous as it was unsustainable.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Into this environment, the Italian attack on Libya was a perfect spanner in the works. Although granted rights in this direction by the powers, including a recognition of her special interests in Libya by the Triple Alliance, the attack took everyone by surprise. The Italian act came in the aftermath of the Second Moroccan Crisis, and it is likely that the spectacle of French consolidation in Morocco compelled Italy to act on its interests in the neighbouring territory. Other recent behaviour also had an impact. Austria’s annexation of Bosnia after decades of occupation and recognition of its rights by the powers was not a dissimilar story of how Italy regarded its position in Libya. Several treaties with France and its Triple Alliance partners had recognised Italy’s unique rights to the region, to be enforced at a period when Rome saw fit. In this multilayered justification for war, the Italian Foreign Minister Antonio de San Giuliano wrote to his Premier in late September 1911. ‘It is necessary,’ San Giuliano said, ‘that all of Europe should find itself in the presence of a fait accompli almost before examining it, and that the situation which follows in international relations should be rapidly liquidated.’ This was akin to Austrian hopes of a quick success in Bosnia which would wow the powers and prevent their interference. And San Giuliano continued with a recommendation that Tripoli and Benghazi, Libya’s major cities, should be occupied, and then explained:

This done, we should give to the exercise of our sovereignty over Tripoli the form best suited to reducing to a minimum, at least for a few years, our expenses and the permanent employment of Italian military forces in those regions. It would probably be possible to use the dynasty of the Karamanli, which has not yet been extinguished, or to come to a solution with Turkey like that adopted for Bosnia in 1878 or with China by Germany and the other European powers.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This reference to the Karamanli – a dynasty which once held Libya in fief for the Ottomans, before Constantinople centralised its rule there from the 1830s – suggested that Italy was searching for a resolution to its invasion along the lines seen in other colonial conflicts. Perhaps, as with the French in Morocco or the British in Egypt, a form of words would be developed which recognised the sovereignty of the weaker potentate, while the de facto power rested in European hands. Italian Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti was serving his fourth non-consecutive term in office by the time the war broke out, though due to the war’s diplomatic dimensions Giolitti’s Foreign Minister San Giuliano was also heavily involved. These two men were aware that in the years preceding the invasion of Libya, the Italian General Staff had written and strategized extensively on the best plan of attack and occupation. They conceived of a strike at the coastal cities, which would be seized, and reinforced by displays of Italy’s naval power, inducing the Ottomans to surrender. It was estimated that a paltry 7,000 Turks garrisoned the Libyan coastline, so the 35,000 or so men in the Italian army was believed more than adequate. The planners were far from careless, but like most wargaming before 1914, the wider implications and unforeseen consequences were never properly fleshed out, including a plan for the less developed, mostly desert interior of Libya, or the contingencies for meeting a more determined Ottoman resistance.[[6]](#footnote-6)

If the military planning left something to be desired, diplomatic circumstances appeared more favourable. Since 1884, Italy had attempted to impress its Libyan interests upon the great powers, and from 1902, where an accord with France recognised the interests of both states in their respective spheres – Morocco and Libya – Italy was encouraged further.[[7]](#footnote-7) One could ask how sincere these powers were regarding Italy’s initiative, particularly since the greatest encouragement seemed to come from Britain, France and Russia – all members of the Entente. Were they merely trying to trick Italy into making a big mess, in the hope that the interconnected web of interests would converge to undermine the Triple Alliance? If so, these goals were kept very quiet. Even British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey signalled his acceptance of Italian plans. When in late July 1911 San Giuliano produced Italy’s justification for war in Libya – the tenuous claim that Italians were under attack there – Grey humoured his Italian counterparts and encouraged them onwards. Grey ‘desired to sympathise with Italy’ considering ‘the very good relations between us,’ and ‘should the hand of Italy be forced,’ Grey asserted that ‘in the face of the unfair treatment meted out to Italians, the Turkish government could not expect anything else.’ Grey also assured his subordinate, Undersecretary Sir Arthur Nicolson, that it was ‘most important’ that Britain and France did not impede Italian designs.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Although the Entente had been encouraging, Italy was far less forthcoming with its actual allies in the Triple Alliance. Here, remarkably, Rome was almost silent on what it intended to do. Its partners had also made it clear that an attack on Libya was not something they could recommend. Austria-Hungary was concerned with maintaining the status quo in the Balkans and wider Ottoman Empire following their disruption of it. Germany was similarly motivated by this status quo, and anticipated grave complications if an attack on one Turkish possession facilitated further instability in the Balkans. In Constantinople, the German ambassador warned his Italian counterpart that the occupation of Libya could collapse the entire Ottoman Empire. Nor was San Giuliano ignorant of the potential consequences. In a long report to the King and Prime Minister in late July 1911 the Italian Foreign Minister acknowledged the ‘probability’ that reduced Ottoman prestige could ‘induce the Balkan peoples to action against it and hasten a crisis that might almost force Austria to act in the Balkans.’ Yet this calculated risk was informed by another familiar justification – supposedly, Ottoman naval forces were being rebuilt, and could compete with the Italians in the near future, so it was better to strike now. In fact, the Ottoman navy was negligible, and was in no position to meet the Italian fleet. As Clark discerned though, such a justification was not founded in reality:

San Giuliano’s argument was thus founded less in the facts of the naval balance of power than in a kind of temporal claustrophobia that we find at work in the reasoning of many European statesmen of this era – a sense that time was running out, that in an environment where assets were waning and threats were growing, any delay was sure to bring severe penalties.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In this respect, Italy’s perspective was in keeping with its counterparts. Yet, where they had enjoyed imperial adventures and some rewarding confrontations, Italy had largely remained quiet. Its disastrous failure to establish a colony in Ethiopia meant that Italy entered the twentieth century more chastened and in search of prestige than most. Its membership of the Triple Alliance suggested that more leverage could be gained in approaching French, British or Russian officials through bilateral negotiations. With Austria interested in maintaining the status quo after it had recently disrupted it, and German policy angling for an improvement in Ottoman relations, Italy’s attack would come at the worst time for them. Yet despite this latent hostility to such disruptive plans, on 29 September 1911 the Italian government declared war on the Ottoman Empire, following an ultimatum regarding the supposed ill-treatment of Italians in Libya. By the afternoon of 3 October, 1,700 Italian marines were occupying the city of Tripoli, and over the following weeks, Tobruk, Derna, Benghazi and Homs were also captured. Italian deployments ballooned from 20,000 in the beginning of the war, to more than 100,000 by 1912. Naval exchanges in January and February annihilated Turkish forces off the coast of Lebanon, guaranteeing Italian naval supremacy in the eastern Mediterranean. Everything, so it seemed, was going according to plan.[[10]](#footnote-10)

For Hakki Pasha, the new Grand Vizier, the threat was clear, not just from the Italians, but also in the Balkans, which could take advantage of Ottoman distraction. In recognition of this danger and the reality of Italy’s occupation of several key cities from an early stage, Pasha expressed his willingness for a compromise peace within weeks. This was to be achieved, Pasha believed, by maintaining the façade of Ottoman sovereignty in Libya, while in reality Italy would rule there. The arrangement was similar to that adopted by the British in Egypt and the French in Morocco. ‘We acknowledge the occupation, but desire to rescue our sovereignty,’ the Ottoman Foreign Minister wrote on 11 October, adding ‘That it should be on the whole a fictitious one, would be clear. With this declaration the basis for mediation should be established. It should be for Italy, and not for Turkey, to propose individual conditions.’ In conversations with Sir Arthur Nicolson, undersecretary of the Foreign Office, the Turkish ambassador to London explained this concession, which Nicolson then recorded for Sir Edward Grey:

If the Turkish Government could save appearances by some recognition of the Sultan’s suzerainty and perhaps certain compensations [the ambassador] thought that his Government would be ready to negotiate on such bases with Italy. Suzerainty he said was merely a phrase, and would not in any way restrict the liberty of action of Italy in Tripoli.[[11]](#footnote-11)

If Italy grasped this opportunity, it could have wrapped up the war within a month, sending a clear signal to Europe of its military prestige and capacity. However, inexplicably, neither San Giuliano nor Giolitti were willing to accept this. The flushes of victory had increased Italian demands. The message sent to Italian diplomats was clear – Rome would demand full sovereignty over Libya; the Turks would get no face-saving word salad or vaguely defined sovereignty. Gottlieb von Jagow, the German Foreign Secretary, warned his Italian counterpart that this could push matters to extremities by forcing Turkey’s back against the wall. But Rome did not listen. The Italian press, delirious in its succession of easy triumphs, demanded the highest possible price, and the most complete form of victory. Giolitti, as a political veteran and master of forming coalitions of Italian politicians, recognised that the nationalist right was gaining ground in Italian politics. Sideny Sonnino, a star of the political right, later to represent Italy in the Paris Peace Conference, attacked any mention of Turkish sovereignty, and demanded outright annexation. Though Giolitti initially floated the more moderate compromise, he bowed to the considerable pressure on his flank by announcing the annexation of Libya on 5 November. ‘We could not content ourselves with half measures,’ Giolitti wrote later, explaining in his memoirs that Italy’s aim was

…to resolve the Libyan question in such a way as to eliminate a continual cause of friction between ourselves and Turkey and a source of constant international complications. If the sovereignty, even if only nominal, of the Sultan had been maintained, this aim would have been defeated.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Poorly defined association agreements – of the kind France and Britain enjoyed with other Ottoman dependencies in North Africa – seemed to promise only further tension. The experience in East Africa, where in the 1890s the Italians acquired a loose form of sovereignty, leveraging it with disastrous results against Ethiopia, also informed this decision. Since the Libyan venture was intended to recoup the reputation Italy lost in that disaster, Giolitti understood that anything less than annexation would be a difficult sell. However, by allowing himself to be led by these public opinion and political pressures, rather than the military realities, the Italian Prime Minister was leading his country into a potentially catastrophic quagmire. Indeed, despite the patriotic gloss placed on the campaign to this point, Giolitti knew that Italy’s victory was less complete than it seemed on the surface.

Notwithstanding the stunning initial success, Italy found the Ottoman defence of these territories more durable and complicated than expected. So much time had been spent in the years preceding the attack planning the best possible naval landing, that little attention had been paid to the prospect of continued Ottoman resistance once these coastal bastions fell. With their offers of peace rebuffed, Turkish commanders withdrew into the inland desert, miles from the coast. Basing themselves around several oases dotted through the region, this Turkish resistance was buttressed with local Muslim hostility to the Christian invaders. Allying their resistance with Arab and Berber tribes, the Turks struck back in several costly counterattacks over October and November, breaking through Italian lines in one attack near Tripoli.

As the Italian government was announcing its intention to annex the region outright, the Generals on the ground in Libya was informing the Prime Minister that matters were not as positive as initially thought. Facing intense local opposition and a mood of general hostility from the population, the Generals advised that political initiatives should take precedence over military campaigns. Here was the tacit admission that the Italian war had stalled. In this stalemate, the diplomatic pressure from German and Austria to cease such a disruptive campaign was likely to increase, alongside the Ottoman instinct to resist its uncompromising foe.[[13]](#footnote-13) Among Italy’s Triple Alliance partners, Count Aehrenthal in Vienna bitterly reflected on what would now follow such a bull-headed act:

The effect of the Italian proclamation in Turkey would be bad, and would indefinitely postpone conclusion of peace, as ten days ago Turkish government had informed him that, if Italy proclaimed annexation, they would address remonstrance to the powers, and declare that they would never officially renounce suzerain rights over Tripoli.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Indeed, Aehrenthal had accurately gauged the Ottoman mood. In November 1911 a revolt in Yemen was finally crushed, and in January 1912, a jihad was proclaimed against Italian occupation forces. Arab-Turk unity – a key problem which plagued the Young Turks – actually increased in the face of a common enemy. European diplomats recorded a change in Ottoman temperament, from capitulation to resistance, while Muslim leaders as far afield as Calcutta urged the Turks to fight on. The Turks did continue to propose compromises to Italy – would she be willing to accept sovereignty over five hundred miles of Libyan coast, in return for Ottoman governance of the interior? – but Italy resisted all such compromises, while deflecting repeated European requests for compromise.[[15]](#footnote-15) Throughout the summer of 1912, and even when peace negotiations began in Switzerland, Italy doggedly refused all attempts to moderate its position. The publicly declared intention to annex Libya had by now become an albatross around Rome’s neck. The poorly mapped and sparsely provisioned interior of Libya represented a strategic nightmare for Italian generals, who recommended holding on and awaiting a favourable opportunity. For the fiscal year of 1912-1913, Italian expenditure rose to nearly five hundred million lira, and the defence budget hoovered up almost 50% of the Italian state budget. Still, no matter how many urgent appeals the Italian government received to approach the situation with more tact, it was impossible to back down from outright annexation now.[[16]](#footnote-16)

To break the deadlock in North Africa, the Italian General Staff proposed a far-reaching campaign which would stretch across the Mediterranean, where Italy could leverage its superiority in naval and technological spheres. Here the military and political problems collided; on the outset of war, Italy had assured Europe that the war would be confined to Libya. To violate this commitment now would unsettle the powers further, and might provoke intervention. Rome had already been embarrassed by its more overzealous admirals, who detained French ships on the suspicion that they transported Ottoman contraband, only to release the vessel and offer Paris an apology. An occupation of the Dodecanese Islands from April 1912 did not bring Italy the results she had hoped for either. In July 1912, in the face of stringent opposition from Europe, Italy launched an attack on the Dardanelles, but the attack was inconclusive, and did not force the Turks to the peace table.[[17]](#footnote-17)

In military terms, the Italians distinguished themselves as the first army in the world to use air power in war. In November 1911, a handful of Italian planes dropped grenades on Turkish positions. Within a month, the profound effect this bombing had on Turkish morale was widely reported, and the practice became more common. Airships were also used with increasing frequency, and the combination of plane and airship coordination rendered Turkish resistance more difficult. Leaflets were dropped, inducing Arab irregulars to betray their Turkish commanders, and reconnaissance arial photographs were taken for the Generals to pour over, while bombs were dopped on Turkish supply lines and positions. The Turks were ill-prepared for such innovations, and lacked defensive countermeasures in anti-aircraft weapons, granting Italy extensive air superiority. These successes could not break the military deadlock, but they did foster a popular campaign at home. Italian pilots were proclaimed as heroes, and a ‘Wings for Italy’ fundraising effort brought three million lira into the exchequer. What had once been a technological curiosity and a question for theorists thus became reality in the turmoil of war.[[18]](#footnote-18)

European diplomacy did not sit still in the meantime. From October 1911, Charykov, the Russian ambassador in Constantinople had pressed the Turks for concessions at the Straits, in return for a Russo-Turkish alliance directed against Austria. In this the ambassador had gone beyond his remit, but with support from Ambassador Izvolsky in Paris, the moment appeared ripe to seize the initiative and acquire a measure of revenge for the annexation of Bosnia Herzegovina. The British were opposed, but German hopes that this would scupper the Entente proved premature. Neither France nor Britain, notwithstanding their concerns at Russia’s intentions in the Straits, would consent to leaving her isolated. The offer was thus ignored, but Russo-German diplomacy continued through backchannels, as the German Foreign Minister sought an accord with Russia which might damage the Entente, neglecting Austria in the process. The overtures were refused, but concerns that Italy might not renew the Triple Alliance – which had to be done by June 1913 – also motivated Berlin, since Italians had become resentful of Germany’s limited support to this point.[[19]](#footnote-19)

On 8 October 1912, Montenegro declared war on the Ottoman Empire. Whether this tiny mountainous kingdom boasting a smaller population than Prague could achieve any meaningful victory was doubtful, yet it was equally doubtful that Montenegro acted alone. With the Italian war now a year old, concerns grew that a rumoured Balkan coalition set against Ottoman rule was ready to take advantage. This new conflict ultimately granted Rome the triumph it wanted. Ottoman resistance to the annexation melted away at the prospect of losing its European position, and on 18 October 1912 the Treaty of Lausanne formalised the cession of Libya to the Italian Empire. Perseverance had paid off, and Italy would now possess a colony where further goals of Mediterranean expansion could be launched.

The victory was less complete than Rome had hoped. Italy had taken too long to subdue an inferior enemy; its armies had languished in trenches for a year rather than press the war to a decisive conclusion. The quest for prestige which motivated San Giuliano and the Prime Minister compelled them to pursue annexation of Libya at a far higher cost than they might otherwise have gained through more moderation.[[20]](#footnote-20) The war also exposed fault lines within the Triple Alliance, as the Entente was more prone to cheering on Italy than its alliance partners. Although the Triple Alliance was renewed for five more years in late 1912, this did not ease the uncertainty surrounding Italian intentions. Conrad, the Austrian chief of staff, is said to have thought the alliance ‘a pointless farce’, and ‘a burden and a fetter which he would fain cast off at the first opportunity.’ Perhaps Conrad was not the most reliable weathervane of Austro-German perceptions of Italy, since he had been dismissed in late 1911 for repeatedly demanding Vienna strike against Rome while its armies fought the Turks. Still, in the league of conservative powers seeking to maintain the status quo, Italy now stood aside from Germany, Austria or the Turks. San Giuliano might have complained that it was well for Austria to trumpet the status quo once she had gotten what she wanted, but the strike on Libya reduced trust between Italy and the Austro-German bloc of the Triple Alliance, just at the point where the Entente began to look at Italy differently.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The French understood that Italy was more useful to the Entente if it remained an unruly partner of its German rival. Franco-Italian competition over North Africa did not have to prevent some kind of accord, nor did it guarantee Italian hostility in the event of a Franco-German war. For the Ottomans, moreover, the Italian episode showed that any semblance of pro-Ottoman sentiment for the sake of the balance of power was now defunct. The powers might have balked at Italy’s strike, lamenting its potential consequences, but none stood by Turkey’s side despite the implications. Britain’s preference to support Italy during the war over its erstwhile status as protector of the Ottoman status quo – manifesting as recently as the Young Turk revolt, for instance – showed the striking extent to which matters had changed. The Turks had never been so alone in Europe, and in this power vacuum, Constantinople turned more readily towards Berlin.[[22]](#footnote-22) Europe did not have much time to reflect on the nature of this war, however, as on the same day Italy and Turkey made peace, it was learned that Montenegro was no longer alone. Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece had joined the conflict. The Balkan Wars had finally begun.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The status quo arising from the 1878 Treaty of Berlin had by no means pleased everyone. However, it had facilitated a period of relative peace, punctuated by crises in the mid-1880s over Bulgaria and in 1908-1909, as we have seen, in Bosnia. The Italian attack represented the beginning of the end of this fragile arrangement. The Balkan States, long suspected as the most turbulent, ambitious, uncontrollable element of the status quo, dramatically burst forth from the confines of past treaties in October 1912. Where once Balkan powers had fought one another, or leaned more heavily towards one bloc or another, now they were united in their desire to rid Europe of the Turk, and seize the territory for themselves. If they succeeded, their corresponding expansion in power would not merely jeopardise the integrity of the Ottoman Empire, it could reopen the Eastern Question, and undermine the balance between the Entente and Triple Alliance. Contemporaries had long anticipated that these newer Balkan nation states – harder to control or to predict – would fall upon the remnants of the Ottoman Empire’s European possessions, and now the tidal wave of nationalism was finally breaking over south-eastern Europe. But this wild card was not the only concern contemporaries had. With Austria unwilling to accept any such alteration to the status quo, and Russia positioned as the main ally of Pan Slav, anti-Ottoman imperatives laying behind the war, the stage was set for yet another confrontation between the two blocs.

The military developments may be summarised briefly here, since it is the political realm during and after the war that is of primary interest to us. One thing can be clarified first; the Balkan powers astounded contemporary Europe with their rapid progress. In retrospect their success should not have been a surprise, as these four powers could coordinate a four-pronged attack on Turkey’s European possessions. Yet, it was the speed which truly resonated. Throughout October and November 1912, the Ottomans lost successive battles with their foes, and lost a substantial amount of ground. Bulgaria poured 300,000 men into Thrace, instigating a push towards Constantinople which was only halted twenty miles from the city. Serbia entered Macedonia with 132,000 men, defeating successive Turkish armies and removing the Ottomans altogether from the territory by the end of November. Montenegro pushed into Albania with its smaller army composed mostly of militia, but these were supported by Serbia once the aforementioned victories in Macedonia were assured.

The Greek army marched north-east into Thessaly, seizing Thessalonica by the first week of November. At sea, the Greek navy focused on the island of Lemnos, with the wider goal of acquiring the Aegean Islands. Subsequent landings in Chios and Mytilene secured these islands, and in spring 1913 Samos was also seized.[[24]](#footnote-24) The capture of Thessalonica roused hostilities between the Greeks and Bulgarians, the latter intending to seize the city for its Aegean ambitions. Greece was also less successful in its campaigns into southern Albania, where they became bogged down in heavily fortified sieges. Still, as Clark discerned, the success of the Balkans was astonishing. Within six weeks, European Turkey had become extinct. So complete was the Balkan success that by 3 December 1912 an armistice was signed with the Ottomans, and the only remaining points of contention were those forts still under siege.[[25]](#footnote-25) There followed a conference in London consisting of all the concerned powers; these negotiations were to continue even as the armistice expired and fighting resumed. The Concert of Europe now had the formidable task of containing the war, while also grappling with the consignment of centuries of Balkan history to the dustbin. Turkish rule in these provinces, while far from ideal, did suit the powers as it maintained a stable status quo in territories claimed by multiple ethnicities. Now a new era would take shape, where expansionist Balkan powers, emboldened by their success, might demand more. The clues to the inherent fragility of the Balkan League and the dangers it posed to European stability may be revealed by an examination of the League itself, and the interests which served to weave it together.

The Balkan League was in many respects an assembly of the avenging States of the Balkan. Each of the four members brought their own advantages. Bulgaria contributed the largest army, owing to its larger population. Greece provided the navy, which could protect against Ottoman naval landings and blockades. Montenegro enjoyed connections to the royal families of Italy and Russia, thanks to its enterprising monarch. Serbia’s contribution was more mixed, consisting of a respectably sized army and no shortage of national fervour. Such a combination of forces represented a considerable threat to Ottoman power and prestige, and it was against the Ottomans that the League was primarily directed. The war seems to have come as a shock to the Turks. This may appear strange if we view the Balkan League as an inevitable nationalist reaction against Turkish imperialism, but the reality was in fact more nuanced. The prospect of Bulgaria and Serbia joining forces against their Ottoman and Habsburg enemies had long seemed unlikely thanks to one critical factor in Serb-Bulgar relations: Macedonia. The birthplace of Alexander the Great had since fallen to the Ottomans. Yet, as Macedonia existed to the north of Greece, to the south of Serbia, and to the west of Bulgaria, each of these powers had interests to pursue there, and these interests conflicted with their neighbours.

For Greece, but especially for Serbia and Bulgaria, Macedonia’s status as both ethnically Greek and ethnically Slav identified the territory as the ideal avenue for expansion. This would be done at the expense of the Ottomans, who ruled the region, but also, arguably, at the expense of the Macedonian people themselves. For some years the assumption had been that the Turks would grant Macedonia a more autonomous arrangement, akin to that once enjoyed by Romania and Bulgaria, and this appeared to Macedonians as the best opportunity for their future prospects. Serbia and Bulgaria opposed such a settlement, since this would entrench Ottoman rule, give Macedonians a taste of limited independence, and above all block their plans for expansion into Macedonia. Neither Serbia nor Bulgaria nor Greece could agree on how to divide Macedonia among themselves; each power laid claim to most of or all of the territory, legitimised by Greek or Slavic national ideas. Since Macedonia had become increasingly populated by ethnic Slavs over the centuries, neither claims were illegitimate, but they also served as a constant wedge between the Balkan states. Until they could be resolved, cooperation among the Balkan states was impossible. So, how did the Balkan states resolve this dispute sufficiently to facilitate unity and cooperation against the Turks? The answer requires a degree of contextualisation, but is no less fascinating because of it.[[26]](#footnote-26)

When the Balkans entered the twentieth century, there was little indication either of how unstable or how vital this region would later become to the interests of the great powers. In 1903, a coup replaced the pro-Habsburg Serbian dynasty with one more aligned towards Russia, and more willing to cooperate with Bulgaria. Searching for greater security, Belgrade continued to approach Bulgaria with offers of a better understanding after several decades of confrontation – not to mention a war in the mid-1880s where Serbia had to be saved from defeat by an Austrian intervention. In 1904-05, this bore fruit with a Treaty of understanding followed by a customs union between the two states. This reduced tariffs and customs duties between them while enabling the two states to trade as one unit with external trade partners. Austria responded with the so-called Pig War in 1906, a trade blockade of Serbia which only pushed Belgrade further into Russia’s orbit. By the time of the Bosnian Annexation Crisis in 1908, Austro-Serb relations had deteriorated, and by the conclusion of that crisis Austria had threatened war against Serbia if it did not consent to the annexations. Clearly, Vienna had come to see Serbia as its main foe in the Balkans, and its policy was adjusted to fit this reality.

However, the news was not all bad for Austria, because by 1908 Serb-Bulgarian relations had returned to their former pattern of competition and criticism. The root cause of this antagonism was the question of Macedonia or, more specifically, disagreements between them over how this region and others under Turkish rule should be divided up. As the British ambassador to Belgrade put it in 1907:

To sum up the whole situation as regards the relations between Servia and Bulgaria, it is clear that they can never be cordial and stable until the competition between the two nationalities for an eventual acquisition of the Slav countries still under Turkish rule comes to an end. [Serbian Prime Minister Nikola] Pasic was in favour of cooperating with Bulgaria for common aims, and of deferring the discussion of the rights of the two nations to the expected inheritance until it should actually fall due, but his intentions were frustrated by the uncompromising claim of the Bulgarians to the whole territory awarded to them by the [1878] Treaty of San Stefano.[[27]](#footnote-27)

During the Bosnian Annexation Crisis, as we saw, Bulgaria declared its independence. No longer were the Bulgars to be constrained within the limits of Ottoman autonomy; henceforth they were to be sovereign, with their ambitions as untrammelled as those of Belgrade. The outcome of the 1908-1909 crisis may be viewed as an Austrian triumph, but it also shattered the 1897 agreement between Vienna and St Petersburg to ‘keep the Balkans on ice’, and refrain from adjusting the status quo there. This agreement secured Russia’s flank during the war with Japan, but now it was extinct, and if this suggested a new era of Austro-Russian competition, it also highlighted that, for the Balkan states, the old ban on wars of expansion was now lifted.[[28]](#footnote-28) In the subsequent negotiations to maintain the Balkans on an even keel, exhaustive discussions between its states characterised the next few years. With Italy’s attack on Ottoman Libya, the opportunity to strike into Turkey’s Balkan territories and seize them once and for all appeared riper than it ever had. If the Balkan states did not act now, they may not get another chance. In the midst of these considerations, as Italian forces occupied much of Libya’s coast and its ships patrolled the Aegean, Bulgaria, Serbia and Greece came to see that, in fact, they held much common ground.

On 13 March 1912, a Treaty of Alliance was signed between Serbia and Bulgaria. The agreement provided for a defensive alliance against Vienna, of critical use for Serbia, and an offensive alliance against the Ottomans, of far more interest to both. Included within were provisions for the partition of Macedonia. The Gordian Knot had apparently been cut, through a compromise which partitioned the region between a Serbian zone, Bulgarian zone, and a contested zone under the Tsar’s arbitration. This latter zone contained the most disputed claims, but that both powers were willing to put these questions on the backburner for now suggested that a new turn in Balkan politics had arrived. This turn towards unity was followed with further bilateral treaties; in late May Bulgaria formed an alliance with Greece; in August and October, Montenegro signed alliances with Bulgaria and Serbia respectively. The apparent strength of this Balkan League was something to behold, but this belied its real defects, including disagreement between the two leading partners over the division of the spoils. Serb Prime Minister Nikola Pasic, to take one instance, complained that Serbia should have driven a harder bargain, and he signalled an intention to renegotiate the accord when possible. Further, the goals possessed by Serbia and Bulgaria in particular were strikingly far-reaching. Serbia intended to acquire Kosovo, the Sanjak of Novi Pazar, its portion of Macedonian territory, and an Adriatic port, likely in Albania; Bulgaria also sought Macedonian territory, but had greater ambitions to expand towards the Aegean Sea, into Thrace, and perhaps seize Constantinople itself. Precisely how incompatible these aims were would be demonstrated shortly after the First Balkan War ended, but for now, they were just about overtaken by the opportunism of the moment.[[29]](#footnote-29)

We would be remiss if we did not pause for a moment to reflect on Russia’s role in the creation of this Balkan League. The negotiations and arrangements detailed above were not necessarily invented in St Petersburg, but they were heavily encouraged forward, thanks to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov and Russia’s ambassador in Belgrade, Nikolai Hartwig. Hartwig arrived in Belgrade in autumn 1909, and immediately began plotting for a policy which would avenge the annexation, reconstitute Balkan solidarity, and aim this weapon squarely at Vienna. A common theme of this period was the inability of great powers either to fully comprehend or properly control the outbursts of patriotic nationalism in these Balkan States; to Hartwig, it was strategically sensible for Serbia and Bulgaria to close ranks against the common enemies, and it did not quite matter how these disputes were resolved, so long as they did not interfere with the present goal of expansion.

Viewed as the ‘Regent’, for his control over Serbian policy, Hartwig did have an important friend in place – the Serbian ambassador to Bulgaria – who smoothed over the disputes and arrive at the alliance treaty mentioned above. Hartwig was convinced that the favourable circumstances created by Italy’s war had to be leveraged. ‘The present moment is such,’ he wrote to the Russian Foreign Minister in October 1911, ‘that both states would be committing the greatest offence against Russia and Slavdom if they showed even the slightest vacillation.’ On another point, however, Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov disagreed that the moment was ripe, and this was the question of the Straits. In previous years, Charykov, Russia’s ambassador in Constantinople, had pushed for a settlement of the Straits question, which would have enabled Russian warships to pass through the Dardanelles if it was resolved in her favour. By late 1911 though, Sazonov sought to nip these efforts in the bud. Charykov was recalled, ostensibly because he had disobeyed Sazonov’s orders, but in reality, because Britain and France had signalled that they were uncomfortable with the question.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Interestingly, this charge of acting beyond their orders was not applied to Hartwig. On the contrary, once Sazonov returned from his convalescence in December 1911 and assumed full control over Russian foreign policy, he supported Hartwig’s initiatives. Sazonov understood that the Italian war would have repercussions for the Balkans, yet he had to tread carefully. He avoided giving explicit signs of his opposition to the Ottomans, yet in private, he gave his whole support to the Serb-Bulgarian alliance. A secret protocol of this treaty contained a provision to advise Russia on the intention to make war, including Russian veto power on the decision one way or another if neither side could agree, while the Tsar would arbitrate any settlement regarding the spoils. There was palpable concern among Russian officials – most notable the ambassador to Bulgaria – that this Balkan League might slip out of Russia’s control. What would happen if both Serbia and Bulgaria agreed to declare war? This would render any Russian veto meaningless. What would happen if these powers placed a greater premium on expansion than on a sensible division of the spoils? Sazonov pushed these concerns to the side. He proceeded to assume the façade of an honest broker, earnestly preserving the status quo, while privately pushing for maximalist Balkan gains.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Sazonov was playing a dangerous game, yet if he played it with sufficient skill, the Balkan League could remove the Turks from Europe, empower the Balkan States, and jeopardise Austria’s Balkan interests – all without the Tsar having commanded a single soldier. The risks were thus great, particularly as few anticipated a Balkan victory. Certainly, the rapid progress of Balkan forces, who ejected the Turks from the Balkans by the end of 1912, took Europe and perhaps even Sazonov himself by surprise. From the outset of the war, Sazonov had made it clear that Russia would not provide these states with assistance; this must have seemed curious to those officials who had cooperated with the Russians up to this point to make the Balkan League a reality. Sazonov wanted the favourable results of a Balkan resurgence, without the attendant complications, though they soon blew up in his face. When he went to Paris at the beginning of the Balkan War, Sazonov told the Serbian ambassador there that Serbia’s mobilisation had been ill-advised, and that the war should be resolved as quickly as possible. This may have been done to relax the French officials present in the room at the time. Yet, the Serb ambassador rightly retorted that Russia had full knowledge of the Serb-Bulgarian treaty and its provisions, an embarrassing revelation for Sazonov while in the presence of French officials he intended to keep in the dark.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Sazonov escaped this awkward conversation by claiming Russia only had knowledge of the 1904 defensive treaty between Bulgaria and Serbia – an obvious attempt at deceptive obfuscation. Sazonov’s problem was that Russia was unprepared for war, and thus could not intervene to aid its Balkan friends. Yet, to have admitted this would have meant diluting the Balkan League’s potential, so instead these powers were informed that Russia stood ready to defend them. In one particular area this encouragement had stringent limits. Bulgaria was clearly in the best position to advance into Thrace and thus threaten Constantinople. The nineteenth century was characterised by this question of the Tsar acquiring Constantinople, but by 1912, Russia had to satisfy itself with Turkey retaining hold of it for the foreseeable future. On the other hand, it was imperative that no third party, such as Bulgaria, be permitted to capture it. This would also jeopardise the Straits question, upon which Sazonov intended to await a more favourable European hearing. We can thus discern several ongoing currents and even contradictions inherent in Sazonov’s position. He treated the Russian press similarly; on the one hand asserting that nationalist agitation would not influence Russian policy, while on the other submitting cuttings of this press opinion to his ambassadors, with the intention that they might influence European opinion by revealing the strength of Russian public opinion on particular questions.[[33]](#footnote-33)

But Sazonov, and the Tsar, were not the only powers to be interested in the Balkans, while in possession of curiously contradicting policies. On 11 November 1912 the Kaiser published a memorandum to his officials detailing German policy in the current Balkan crisis. Considering Germany’s behaviour in another Balkan crisis just before the First World War, we may be surprised to see a pacific mood sweeping through the Kaiser’s memo, which is worth detailing here. It read:

Austria has incautiously adopted a harsh dictatorial tone vis-à-vis the Serian demands in the press and in official decrees. This can have a provocative effect and lead to complications. Serbia demands access to the Adriatic Sea with ports, Austria refuses this wish… Russia seems to want to support Serbia’s aspirations and could collide with Austria about this in such a way that it could come to a conflict with weapons. Then the *casus foederis* applies for Germany because Vienna would be attacked by Petersburg – according to the Dual Alliance Treaty.

This presented an eerie prediction of what was to come in 1914, but the memo went still further, as it continued:

This requires mobilisation and a war against two fronts for Germany… Paris will undoubtedly be supported by London. Thus Germany must enter a war of survival with three Great Powers in which everything has to be risked and perhaps she can perish. All this happens because Austria does not want the Serbs in Albania or Durazzo. It is obvious that this goal is for Germany no rallying cry for a war of annihilation and for a war fought for such reasons, and nobody can defend in front of his conscience and his responsibility before God and his people risking Germany’s existence for such a reason. It would far exceed the confines of the Treaty.[[34]](#footnote-34)

This mood of hesitation and fear on the part of Berlin may be explained by Sazonov’s erratic behaviour. Russia announced a trial mobilisation on 30 September, a few weeks before the war erupted. By the end of October Sazonov declared his support for Austria’s policy of maintaining the Balkan status quo. A week later Sazonov informed the Italian government that an Adriatic port was an absolute necessity for Serbia. A few days after this, Sazonov instructed Hartwig to make it known in the Serb government that an *independent Albania* was a necessity. Sazonov warned Hartwig further that if Serbia went too far, Russia would leave Belgrade to its fate. A few weeks after this, Sazonov was again advocating for Serbia’s right to a port in the Adriatic. Shortly after this, he was advising Britain and France that if Austria attacked Serbia, Russia would have to intervene to aid her.

For the Balkan States, as much as for the two blocs, it would have been difficult to determine what Sazonov’s policy actually was. ‘Sazonov is so continually changing his mind,’ Buchanan, the British ambassador to St Petersburg, complained in November 1912, ‘that it is difficult to follow the successive phases of pessimism and optimism through which he passes. I have more than once reproached Sazonov with inconsistency and with frequent changes of front.’ Sazonov, for all his ambition and industry, was of course subject to the whims of the Tsar, and it is possible that his flip-flopping reflected Nicholas II’s own views on the situation. In other respects, Sazonov’s appointment as Foreign Minister and his subsequent attempts to influence Russian policy reveal that he did possess tangible goals. He continued to push for a departure from the caution inherent in Russian policy since the loss to Japan. He also pushed for an increase to the military budget, against the opposition of Premier Kokovstov.

On 5 November, Russian reservists were ordered to remain on active duty, increasing Russian military readiness, as it now possessed active 400,000 reserves in addition to the 170,000 mobilised on Austria’s Polish border. In late November, the Russian War Minister attempted to go further with a partial mobilisation of the whole army against Vienna, but even Sazonov opposed this venture as needlessly provocative. In particular, the account of Russian Premier Vladimir Kokovstov deserves mention. Kokovstov recalled how he and other senior officials were called to a meeting with the Tsar on 23 November 1912, having no indication of the meeting’s purpose beforehand. While there, the Tsar unfurled a map on the table, and gave his estimate for the differences in army size when facing down the Austrians on the border. The Tsar recommended mobilisation and an enlargement of the army. The request hit Kokovstov and even Sazonov like a bomb. Kokovstov wrote that he ‘had to struggle to regain his composure’ when explaining to the Tsar why Russia could not just mobilise its army on the Austrian border. This would lead to a war with Austria and Germany. The Tsar responded vaguely as follows:

I do not, just as yourself, allow the idea of an imminent war. We are not ready for it. But we have before us not the problem of war but a simple measure of precaution, consisting of augmenting the ranks of our army on the frontier and of moving up the troops now removed too far in the rear somewhat closer.

Kokovstov delicately replied that whatever the Tsar wished to call the mobilisation, Austria and Germany would view it as such, and as a hostile escalation. The Central Powers, Kokovstov believed, were awaiting an opportunity – or an excuse – which could be used to make this war while Russia repaired herself. The Tsar was typically stubborn. ‘You exaggerate,’ he retorted, adding:

I have no intention of mobilising our troops against Germany, with whom we are on the best of terms which cause us no apprehensions, but Austria is openly hostile and has taken a series of steps against us including the increased fortifications at Krakow.

Kokovstov replied again that Austria and Germany were essentially the same power, since both were obliged to defend the other in case of an attack, which included such a mobilisation. Further, the Premier warned, Russia had not notified France of its intentions to partially mobilise, a violation of past understandings since France would have to deal with the consequences if Austria and Germany attacked.[[35]](#footnote-35) Thus, there were limits to Sazonov’s policy, but he certainly placed Austro-Russian antagonism at the centre of the developing crisis. In mid-December the War Minister requested the reinforcement of frontier cavalry in Kiev and Warsaw, a call up of reservists, the transport of horses, reinforcement of military guards and a ban on the export of horses. Of these provisions, only the ban on horse exports and call up of reservists was later dropped; even the minor measures detailed above were bound to unsettle those watching on from Vienna. Indeed, as the Balkan War raged, Austro-Russian standoffs involving costly mobilisations characterised the winter of 1912-1913, bringing both powers near the brink of war.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Sazonov kept his eyes upon Austria, but of far more immediate concern for him and the Russian government by late 1912 was the success of the Bulgarian army, and its apparently unstoppable march towards the gates of Constantinople.[[37]](#footnote-37) A quarter of all Russian trade passed through the Straits, but more importantly, Russia sent most of its exports through the Straits, and for a country forced to import large quantities of expensive technological goods, maintaining this balance was essential. For a time, the closure of the Straits to all military traffic protected Russia’s southern coasts. However, during the Russo-Japanese War and the brief closure forced by the Italians in spring 1912, the Straits issue became more vital. Evidently, for the sake of Russian security and flexibility, Russia would have to renegotiate the conditions governing the Straits, and her relationship with them. Perhaps, this could be resolved through war. However, if it was to be resolved peacefully, Russia would have to wait for the right moment, and she would not accept a conference, since bilateral treaties with the Ottomans were preferred.[[38]](#footnote-38) The wildcard in this issue was Bulgaria, and her well-known dreams of a Greater Bulgarian Empire with Constantinople as its capital.

One could argue that the Balkan League, being in large part a Russian creation, surely guaranteed that the Bulgarians would disrupt the Straits situation. Yet this seemed to have dawned on Sazonov only in the summer of 1912. By September he informed the Bulgarians that if they did seize Adrianople and then march towards Constantinople then ‘Russia would be obliged to warn them off, as, though she had no desire to establish herself at Constantinople, she could not allow any other Power to take possession of it.’ As to how this would be done, Sazonov’s explained that an ultimatum would be sent to Sofia. The clear assumption was that Russian military might would be sufficient to keep the Balkan League cooperative and prevent any undesirable consequences. These assumptions proved both naïve and inaccurate.[[39]](#footnote-39)

There was something ironic about Sazonov’s concern both before and during the war that Bulgarian forces – hundreds of thousands strong – might overwhelm Ottoman defences and seize the ancient city. This was in fact the crux of the Eastern Question which the great powers, above all Britain, had been asking since the Greeks became independent in 1829. The Eastern Question may be summarised as a strategic conundrum, namely: what would or could Europe do if the Ottoman Empire collapsed? This would leave Russia in an ideal position to seize the spoils, primarily in Constantinople and the Dardanelle Straits, granting them control over all traffic into the Black Sea, and a base from which further expansion to the Mediterranean could follow? The Russo-Turkish War of 1878 had somewhat adjusted this question, since Bulgarian autonomy, followed by independence in 1908, essentially placed a new state in between Russia and its quest for the Straits. This was acceptable when Bulgaria maintained a pro-Russian attitude, but when Sofia welcomed a Coburg onto its throne – Ferdinand, the self-proclaimed Tsar of the Bulgarians – and when Bulgarian policy appeared to tilt towards Vienna, this buffer became much more of an issue.

By October 1912, Sazonov was deeply anxious that triumphant Bulgarian armies could seize Constantinople, jeopardising Russia’s long-term plans and her immediate strategic concerns. British officials may have asked how Russia liked agonising about an unstoppable force seizing the Ottoman capital, but instead, Sir Edward Grey proved receptive to Sazonov’s requests. These amounted to advocating support only for Bulgaria to attain its borders as laid down in 1878, and not to expand beyond them. However, neither Britain nor France was willing to go as far as Sazonov was; they would not pressure or coerce the Bulgarians on this point, for fear of blunting their advance or pushing Sofia towards the Triple Alliance. A quick glance at the proposed borders of Bulgaria in 1878 and by the end of the First Balkan War in 1913 reveal that Bulgaria did not heed Sazonov’s request. Indeed, Sazonov later modified this stance – Bulgaria would be permitted to take Adrianople and portions of Thrace, but they must leave the Straits and Constantinople alone.

By 4 November though, the Sultan pleaded with European powers for their intervention to help stop the Bulgarians and preserve stability in his capital. This contributed to Sazonov’s pessimism. In anticipation of Bulgarian triumph, from 6 November the Russian Foreign Minister began to claim that he would not object to a temporary occupation of Constantinople, but that they should not be permitted to remain there. Sazonov pointed out the complications this would for future negotiations, yet he added that Russia’s fleet would be forced to sail to the Straits for the sake of her interests there. Sazonov was on pins and needles for the next week and a half, until the Bulgarian offensive was finally blunted twenty miles from Constantinople on 18 November at the Chatalja Lines.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Remarkably though, Sazonov had not left matters to chance. At the prospect of a Bulgarian entry into the city, Sazonov had concocted a scheme for a Russian naval landing consisting of five thousand soldiers and three transport vessels. Russia was to explain that its status as the defender of Christians and its close proximity to the Straits compelled it to intervene directly. Only by possessing the necessary force, Sazonov argued, would Russia be entitled to a decisive voice in the event of an Ottoman retreat into Asia Minor. In memos sent secretly in mid-November to senior officials, Sazonov elaborated on the lure of Constantinople, before rationalising that the pro-Balkan policy must be prioritised. Otherwise, even if in possession of Constantinople, Austria would make gains among these states at Russia’s expense, highlighting Russian expansionism to turn opinion there against the Tsar. The preferred option would be to seize territory in the Bosphorus, thus granting Russia control over naval traffic, while avoiding the headache of occupying Constantinople outright. If the Bulgarians did manage to achieve their coup, in other words, Sazonov was prepared to deploy Russian power in response to the new situation, though he would prioritise the Balkans over the Straits, if pushed to make a choice.[[41]](#footnote-41)

As significant as the geographic changes in the Balkans were then, the change in Austro-Russian relations was of arguably similar importance. Sazonov, with the approval of the Tsar and the government, was secretly prepared to use force to ensure Russia got its way, and treaties were not to be trusted as a substitute for force if her vital interests were at stake. We should not forget that at this point in autumn 1912, limited mobilisations along the Austro-Russian border were still ongoing. It is thus possible to argue that by the dawn of 1913, a new spirit of militarisation now animated both sides, and war parties grew in Vienna and St Petersburg. In the Russian case, two Grand Dukes – cousins of the Tsar and married to Montenegrin princesses – formed the nucleus of a more aggressive mindset. More cautious Russians like Premier Kokovstov were gradually sidelined, and performed badly in the schizophrenic atmosphere of the initial months of the Balkan War. Rather than absorb the lesson that tense military standoffs involving expensive mobilisations were the worst possible way to deal with a crisis, to an extent, this willingness to push matters to extremities, and to risk a more catastrophic conflict, was internalised instead. The personality of the Tsar changed with the influx of these more belligerent voices, and this was accompanied by a more active policy which seemed to affirm that Russia had returned to the European stage; the era of defeat, caution, and consolidation had given way to one of ambition and expansion.[[42]](#footnote-42) And yet, the Balkan Wars were by no means over.

The First Balkan War was in many respects a two-month affair. By December 1912, much of the territory later ceded by the Ottomans had been seized, never to return to the Sultan’s writ. Thus, the campaigning in spring 1913 revolved around a handful of outstanding issues. A Bulgarian military recovery facilitated the capture of Adrianople, but even as Sazonov sweated, Constantinople remained safe. For Austria, and eventually other powers, the most pressing question was the future of Albania. This territory had once been the domain of Pyrus of Epirus, but by the twentieth century Albania was shaped more by its history as an underdeveloped province of the Turks. For Serbia, in search of a land corridor to an Adriatic port, and for Montenegro, in search of the same thing, the creation of an independent Albanian state would jeopardise these plans. It would also deny Greece the chance to surge northwards, and incorporate some ancient Greek territory into their realm; citizens in the south of Albania were, it was claimed, ethnically Greek. Yet for Austria the prospect of an expanded Serbia or Montenegro with an Adriatic port was a step too far. The subsequent deliberations over Albania’s future continued well into 1914, but there were other problems to solve in spring 1913, problems which threatened to rupture of the Balkan League itself.[[43]](#footnote-43)

From December 1912 to August 1913, London hosted a conference of ambassadors. Their mission was to resolve the consequences of the Balkan War, but much of its time was spent considering the status of Albania. Only in summer 1912 did the Turks actually define the limits of Albanian territory, but could these prescriptions then be applied if Albania was to be constituted as an independent state? This question became crucial since Albania was in the way of any Montenegrin or Serbian efforts to push steadily west and acquire a port on the Adriatic. For Italy and for Austria, such expansion was unacceptable, since it could enable these Balkan states to grow fat and powerful on Mediterranean trade. In Vienna, particularly, the fear that Serbia might acquire Scutari, Albania’s primary port town with a majority Catholic population, was rooted in the additional possibility that this port would then become an outlet of Russia. For, as Austrian statesmen understood it, the intimacy and interdependence of Russo-Serbian relations meant that Belgrade danced to Russia’s tune. The best means for avoiding this outcome was to erect an independent Albanian state, which would block Serbia and Montenegro and preserve some semblance of the status quo.

For Austria to have a role in creating this new Balkan state would also gel with its self-professed policy of ‘the Balkans for the Balkan peoples’. It was for each of these states to determine their future, Austrian Foreign Minister Leopold von Berchtold maintained. Such Austrian selflessness could also be contrasted with Serbian greed for land and ports at local expense. They could also help roll back Serb-Montenegrin forces, who then occupied a large swathe of northern Albania. Scutari nonetheless became the symbol of this plan, and the European powers appeared to be on board with it. In the first meeting of the London Ambassadors’ Conference on 17 December 1912, chaired by Sir Edward Grey, it was agreed that an independent Albania should be established under the joint guarantee of the powers. This was the Concert of Europe in action – working as a collective to defuse problems for the greater good. Their work continued into the spring of 1913, and the situation became more tense. Serbia only agreed to evacuate its 100,000 strong army from Albania on 11 April, but there was still Montenegro to worry about. King Nikola had seemed impervious to foreign pressure, and his perseverance seemed to pay off when the Turkish commander surrendered Scutari on 23 April.[[44]](#footnote-44)

The capture of Scutari threatened to unravel the limited diplomatic progress of the European Concert. Grey’s aim had been to keep the six major powers on side, and to prevent discussions defaulting to the two blocs. Initially, Anglo-German diplomacy proved effective at cutting through the red tape. London and Berlin possessed significant heft in their respective blocs to bring the other partners along. Russia had also appeared to grow weary of King Nikola, who the Tsar had come to regard as a loose cannon. In April 1913, in fact, Sazonov issued a declaration publicly disavowing Russia’s support of Montenegro’s actions. Scutari, it was proclaimed, was ‘purely Albanian’ and must be incorporated within an independent Albania. This Russian stance encouraged Austria to cooperate, since it suggested a mutually acceptable compromise could be achieved. There was an issue of the Montenegrins and Serbians themselves, who were jubilant at the news of Scutari’s fall. The spectacle of Belgrade marking the joyous occasion with business closures, public celebrations amidst streets lined with flags, and a crowd of 20,000 offering cheers outside the Russian embassy raised concerns that Sazonov might change his mind. Sazonov’s only red line was that Austria should not take unilateral action, a possibility which became unnecessary when, to the surprise of many, on 11 May 1913, King Nikola announced his decision to submit Scutari to the great powers. Three days later, detachments from a multi-power fleet arrived in Scutari to garrison the city. The crisis, so it seemed, had been averted at the last minute.[[45]](#footnote-45)

This shining example of cooperation among the Great Powers was encouraging enough to facilitate further concessions, mostly concerning the borders and status of the new Albanian state. A commission was created, consisting of delegates from the interested powers and an Albanian representative, with the goal of arriving at borders acceptable to all. Throughout the summer additional terms were hammered out, and from 1 August 1913 these delegates met regularly in London. But the problem of disorder within Albania’s ill-defined border regions remained acute. So acute, in fact, that in response to supposed outrages committed by Albanian irregulars, Serbian soldiers crossed into Albanian territory again for the purpose of pacification. Perhaps this was a genuine Serbian effort to restore order, or perhaps it was an attempt to take advantage of the slow deliberations of the commission to gain some leverage for Serbia in the negotiations. Either way, the act was entirely unacceptable to Vienna. She pressed the powers for collective pressure, which was repeatedly applied, but to no avail. Serbia refused to leave the territory, and the Concert appeared powerless to compel her to do so. Left with no other option, and acting outside the joint authority of the Concert, on 18 October 1913 Austria issued an ultimatum to Belgrade. She must evacuate Albania entirely by 26 October, or face the consequences.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Flush with victories from the First Balkan War, and enjoying the short, sharp triumphs of the Second Balkan War between June and July 1913, Serbia could afford to be recalcitrant. Austria had watched with growing concern as Serbian intrigues drew its forces deeper into Albania. In some reports, Serbian ministers were recorded angling for customs agreements with Albanian towns. As the Albanians themselves opposed further encroachments, this resistance only provoked the Serbs further, and on 30 September Serbian Premier Nikola Pasic asserted that for her own protection, Serbia intended to occupy strategic points inside Albanian territory. When Austria enquired about these intentions the next day, Serbia made no official reply. Pasic did travel to Vienna in early October on a charm offensive, likely to try and acquire Austrian approval for his bold policy. While there, Pasic spoke of boundary changes, while emphasising the importance of Austro-Serb relations. Berchtold saw through this front, though he neglected to confront Pasic directly.

All the while, Serbian troops continued their untrammelled advance into Albania. Time was running out; if Vienna neglected to act now, the entirety of Albania could be occupied, amounting to a fait accompli. King Nikola might have evacuated Scutari, but could it be expected that Serbia would evacuate so much of Northern Albania? Perhaps they would not, unless they were forced to do. When additional inquiries and warnings failed to have an effect, on 18 October the aforementioned ultimatum was sent. This bruising experience of failed diplomacy – and the bountiful evidence of Serbia’s manipulation of the situation – helps to explain why Austrian behaviour in the summer of 1914 tended towards unilateral action. Had Vienna not been given repeated proof of the inefficiency of the Concert of Europe to solve these problems through cooperation? Had diplomacy not fallen on deaf ears when faced with the advancing armies of a triumphant nation-state? The toothlessness of Concert diplomacy must be compared with the immediate effect the ultimatum had on Serbia. By 26 October, Serbian forces had evacuated Albania per Austria’s demands. It was also widely popular within Vienna, and turned Berchtold into the man of the hour. Christopher Clark summarised the lessons of the affair:

Belgrade, it seemed, would retreat only as far as Vienna pushed, accepting with equanimity any humiliations that might result; when the Austrians relaxed, the probing and provocations would resume. The axiom that Serbia would only ever ultimately understand force acquired more weight.[[47]](#footnote-47)

When R. J. Crampton assessed this crisis, he reasoned that Austrian behaviour towards Serbia raised suspicions that she was no longer interested in maintaining the Concert’s authority in Albania. Yet, one could argue that this Concert had been entirely useless at keeping the Serbs back. Berchtold had tried to work within the remit of this Concert throughout the summer of 1913; he was, after all, concerned that any aggressive moves might draw Russian opposition, and escalate into a wider conflict. Russia’s unwillingness to accept Serbian behaviour was thus a boon to Berchtold’s position, but he was certainly running out of options by the time Grey announced the breakup of the Ambassadors’ Conference in mid-August. When alternative appeals failed, and when the Serbs continued to undermine the collective agreement on Albania, we might wonder what else Berchtold could have done but issue his ultimatum. Of course, viewing this act in isolation is one thing; viewing this act as a lesson learned by Vienna and then applied during the July Crisis nine months later is quite another. In October 1913, Austrian behaviour was legitimate, since she was only working to uphold and implement the agreements which the Concert had already made on Albania. That the ultimatum was convenient for the other powers on this instance may have lulled Austria into a false conclusion. Should she proceed in this manner again, there was no guarantee of similar acquiescence.[[48]](#footnote-48)

The Albanian question was still not resolved. Particularly, the border between Southern Albania and Northern Greece had become a contested issue. As in the Serbian case, Greek bands of irregulars crossed the disputed border and began seizing territory. Once again, the powers appeared helpless, and once again, Austria stepped forward armed with an ultimatum. Barely a fortnight had passed since a similar policy had been used against Serbia, but when this ultimatum was presented to Greece on 30 October 1913, Austria was now joined by Italy. The Austro-Italian venture caused considerably more consternation than the Serbian act had done. Sir Edward Grey, still burdened with the Albanian headache, was then attempting to orchestrate a quid pro quo between Italy, the Ottomans and Greece. In exchange for a number of Aegean Islands she had seized during the war, Greece would be required to evacuate Southern Albania. The problem was Ottoman opposition to Greek expansion, and Italian cooperation with the Ottomans to acquire recognition for its own island possessions in the Dodecanese. The Turks would accept Italian occupation of these islands if Rome accepted a form of words which granted Constantinople latent sovereignty over them. This, we may recall, was the kind of compromise Italy rejected in Libya, but they were happy to accept it in the Dodecanese. Their agreement could then be folded into the concessions to Greece in the Aegean. Grey had worked on this thankless endeavour for several months when the Austro-Italian demarche was learned of. Greece would have until the last day of 1913 to evacuate Albania, or Vienna and Rome would use force. An extremely unhelpful hourglass now ticked down, as Grey scrambled to acquire the assent of the major powers to this interconnected compromise.[[49]](#footnote-49)

German pressure on its alliance partners was essential in this mission, but Berlin was wary of the compromise. By December 1913 Germany had identified the Ottomans as a potential partner in future struggles between the two blocs. Her influence had risen in Constantinople in the aftermath of the punishing Balkan Wars. German investment poured into Turkey, and German interest in the Berlin to Bagdad railway, for instance, guaranteed that Berlin was unwilling to do anything which might offend the Ottomans. Grey understood that to move the Greeks from Albania, Athens would have to be given those Aegean Islands. Yet, this would mean Turkey acknowledged their cession – a difficult pill to swallow after so many recent losses of territory. The danger, as Grey appreciated, was the collapse of any agreement on Albania. Since Albania’s future worried the Triple Alliance much more than the Entente, Grey hoped he would have some leverage, but German support of the Ottomans threatened to torpedo the entire arrangement.

On 31 December, the Triple Alliance powers signalled their support for the Greek evacuation of Albania, without approving the necessary exchange of islands. Some positive signs did exist; the deadline of the Austro-Italian ultimatum was extended to 18 January 1914. In the months that followed, however, tensions continued to rise without an acceptable result. In February, Greek nationalist elements proclaimed the independence of Southern Epirus, their name for the portion of southern Albania they were supposed to evacuate. The two blocs showed little inclination to compromise, and on 8 March 1914, another Austro-Italian ultimatum was issued to Athens. Grey was outraged – here was another unproductive, provocative act, which sounded the death throes of the European Concert.[[50]](#footnote-50) Grey by now longed to dispense with the entire Albanian morass; he had become tempted by the suggestion of his senior clerk, Eyre Crowe, who had argued that Britain’s best chance for an Albanian settlement was to wash its hands of the affair, and permit the Triple Alliance to resolve it themselves. As Crowe put it:

 Is it worth our while, or is it good policy, for the sake of securing for an independent Albania a better and juster government than she could perhaps hope to get without us, to perpetuate causes of friction between us and the Triple Alliance, and indirectly strengthen the ties which bind Italy to her two partners? Or would it be better to cease our altruistic efforts for the good of Albania, thereby diminishing the friction, whilst indirectly loosening those ties by leaving Austria and Italy to face each other alone in Albania and forcing Germany to take sides between them, instead of being able to back their joint aims.[[51]](#footnote-51)

The suggestion was a perceptive one, because very real disagreements existed within the Triple Alliance on how to proceed. Germany, notably, was attempting to balance the designs of its partners with those of the Turks, and without Britain’s gloss on an Albanian arrangement the subsequent squabbling could pull the Triple Alliance apart. Fortunately for Germany, neither Russia nor France were willing to see the Entente bow out of Albania. Indeed, Grey’s suggestions in this direction appeared to vitalise Entente unity. The Russians, after all, had relented several times since the Bosnian Annexation Crisis, and Sazonov was wary of doing so again. The French were encouraged by German hints to the effect that it had become too difficult to control its partners, and that Berlin would prefer joint action by the Concert. This, it seemed, was worth pursuing. But no amount of notes pinged between the capitals seemed capable of solving the interconnected problems. Instead, the Russians particularly called for greater Entente solidarity on the issue, recommending the transformation of the Entente into a three-way alliance, to reassert their position in Europe and signal to the Triple Alliance that the initiative was not theirs alone.[[52]](#footnote-52) From St Petersburg, Ambassador Buchanan recorded Sazonov’s observations on the situation in mid-February 1914:

We would never, he said, allow the Triple Entente to take any action in which the Triple Alliance would not join, for fear of causing a division among the Powers. There was, however, no use in concealing the fact that Europe was divided into two opposing groups and there were occasions on which the Triple Entente ought to assert itself. In the case of the Islands the despatch of a Franco-British fleet with a Russian ship added to mark our solidarity, would at once stop any attempt which the Turks might take to seize Mitylene and Chios. This was a course to which, he gathered, we would not consent; and the Triple Entente would, as usual, have to bow to the dictates of the Triple Alliance. The latter either by its action or its inaction always succeeded in getting the better of us and the reason for this was to be found in the fact that England was only the friend and not the Ally of France and Russia. If we were ever to hold our own in the world, we should have one day to convert the Triple Entente into a regular Alliance. Were it once proclaimed to the world that there was such an Alliance between us, we should be able to sleep comfortably in our beds without fear of some new 'coup' on Germany's part. The Alliance should be of a purely defensive character. Were either England, France, or Russia to be attacked by any single Power the other two would remain neutral and would only come to the assistance of its Ally in the event of a second Power joining in the war on the other side.[[53]](#footnote-53)

Grey was unwilling to take this serious step. He was already maintaining a difficult balancing act with France, cooperating on military matters without incurring any obligations. These secret negotiations later exploded in his face, but in spring 1914 Grey was certain that even if an alliance could not be created, the Entente could still cooperate to meet the Triple Alliance’s refusals. This, of course, meant that the entire purpose of the Concert was now defunct. Grey had originally wished to prevent negotiations devolving into this split between the two blocs, but from early 1914 this division proved more important than any notion of Concert solidarity. As Sazonov asserted above, the existence of the two blocs could not be denied, and it was natural for statesmen to revert to their interests in these blocs when weighted questions affecting Europe were raised. Grey was sympathetic enough to these arguments to increase cooperation with Russia and France, yet the settlement of the Grecco-Albanian border and the associated agreements over the Aegean Islands continued to elude him. The whole mess continued unresolved, chipping away at European stability, until a far more serious crisis diverted attentions away from the region a few months later. By then, the instruments of pan-European cooperation had been frayed and virtually destroyed. Negotiations between the blocs had instead become the new normal, and Grey was powerless to prevent it.[[54]](#footnote-54)

In any event, it is worth returning to the tumultuous events of summer 1913, where one Balkan War ended and another began, with dramatic consequences for all involved. By 30 May 1913, the First Balkan War was brought to an official end.[[55]](#footnote-55) Once the interest in preserving the peace had been realised, the powers then sought to gain influence in the different Balkan courts. For Russia, this quest was particularly sensitive owing to the troubles with Bulgaria. Bulgarian forces had tried and failed to push to Constantinople, and had ignored Russian warnings to limit their offensive. Could Sofia still be kept in Russia’s sphere? Or was it more beneficial to turn to Romania? The Romanian government had been bribed and flattered to remain aloof from the Balkan War, despite its claims on the Dobruja, a Bulgarian-Romanian border region which straddled the Black Sea coast. Now, as compensation for their neutrality, Bucharest was requesting that this territory be ceded to them, lest they would attack and take it for themselves.

Sazonov might normally have objected to such demands, but the relationship with Bulgaria had deteriorated in recent months, largely as a consequence of improved relations with Serbia. The Serb-Bulgarian disputes over the fate of Macedonia, territory which, each power claimed, they were entitled to due to the borders of their respective medieval empires, caused Russia the greatest problems. Although the two powers had agreed to a division of Macedonia along specified lines, the events of the war had transformed the situation, and military campaigning had run ahead of older agreements. While the Bulgarians had advanced into Thrace and towards Constantinople, indeed, Serbia had accumulated more of Macedonia for itself, and it now refused to leave despite Bulgarian pronouncements that they had violated the 1912 Treaty. Sazonov was initially inclined to support Bulgaria in the dispute, but he was extremely irritated at Tsar Ferdinand’s willingness to use force and escalate the situation. If forced to choose, Sazonov intimated that he would side with Serbia over the Macedonian quarrel; to do otherwise would mean surrendering Belgrade to Austrian pressure. This was demonstrated by Russian approaches to Romania, which could be used to coerce Bulgaria into compromise with Serbia. In summer 1913, Sazonov intimated to Bucharest that Russia would not intervene if Romania took action against the aggressor of a Bulgarian-Serb war. By now, Sazonov had already emphasised to Serbia how important it was that, whatever happened, she not begin the attack. Any Second Balkan War would only occur due to Bulgarian greed, and Europe must be made to see that it was the fault of Sofia, not the other Balkan States.[[56]](#footnote-56)

Interestingly, while Sazonov was happy to see Bulgaria and Romania drift apart, Leopold von Berchtold was attempting to bring them back together. It may be argued that in the aftermath of the First Balkan War, Austro-Hungarian diplomacy had peaked. Serbia had been refused an Adriatic port, Russia had refused to support Belgrade, and Austrian military displays had wrought concessions. Yet, there was no denying that with or without a port, Serbia had grown to become almost unmanageable. Austrian documents and tense telegrams sent from Vienna testify to an atmosphere which appeared perilously close to war. ‘It seems to me,’ wrote Fairfax Cartwright, the British ambassador to Vienna, in late January 1913, ‘that the relations between Russia and Austria-Hungary, instead of showing any signs of improvement, are growing worse from day to day, not officially perhaps but through the steadily increasing animosity between the two nations.’ This, said Ambassador Cartwright, was down to the issue of Serbia:

Serbia will some day set Europe by the ears and bring about a universal war on the continent, and if the French press continues to encourage Serbian aspirations as it has done during the last few months, the Serbs may lose their heads and do something aggressive against the Dual Monarchy which will compel the latter to put the screw into Serbia… It will be lucky if Europe succeeds in avoiding a war as a result of the present crisis.[[57]](#footnote-57)

This fear of war was a direct result of the standoff over an Adriatic port. Denying Serbia a port was essentially damage control, but nothing could be done for the fact that Serbia was now larger, stronger, and more ambitious than ever before. Austria had no way of putting these Serbian expansions back in their box. Indeed, she had no way to counter what Serbian Slav agitation in Austria’s ethnically diverse provinces. Cartwright acknowledged this threat in another letter to London in late May 1913, writing:

As soon as peace is restored in the Balkans, the Austrian authorities anticipate that Serbia will being a far-reaching agitation in the Serb inhabited districts of the Dual Monarchy, and as this country cannot allow any dismemberment of her provinces without incurring the danger of the whole edifice crumbling down, we have all the elements in the near future of another violent crisis in this part of the world, which may not unlikely end in the final annexation of Serbia by the Dual Monarchy. That, however, will lead to a war with Russia, and possibly to a general conflict in Europe.[[58]](#footnote-58)

Cartwright’s estimation of the Austrian mood was perceptive, and this fear of Russian intentions exacerbated the pessimistic mood. Early in May, before the First Balkan War ended, Sazonov wrote to Ambassador Hartwig in Belgrade that for Serbia to ‘reach her goal she must endure another frightful struggle, in which her very existence will be staked.’ Sazonov continued to argue that ‘Serbia’s promised land lies in the territory of the present Austria-Hungary, and not in that for which she is now striving, with the Bulgarians barring the way.’ This, in short, was an instruction to Belgrade not to fight Bulgaria for portions of Macedonia, but to fight Austria for Bosnia and other appendages.[[59]](#footnote-59) Berchtold did not have the luxury of a Habsburg satellite in the Balkans. He was forced instead to aim towards a pro-Austrian group of Balkan States which would neuter Serbian ambitions. Bulgaria and Romania appeared to be the key to such an initiative. It was known that Serb-Bulgarian relations had plummeted, so what better way to isolate Serbia in the Balkans than by welcoming Sofia into the Triple Alliance, where she could find additional security from a Romanian partnership?[[60]](#footnote-60) Berchtold advertised this goal to Austria’s ambassador in Sofia in mid-April 1913, advising him as follows:

We have confidential information that negotiations are in progress between Belgrade and Athens for the purpose of arranging a partition of the conquered territory, which would make Serbia and Greece neighbours in Macedonia and would completely exclude Bulgaria. . . Under such circumstances the [Bulgarian] relation to Romania would be decisive, and we must, therefore, again point out the vital interest which Bulgaria has in the closest possible relation to Romania . . . Bulgaria can be certain that we will most warmly support her aspirations should they become a topic of discussion in direct negotiations with Bulgaria's allies or under the advice of the Great Powers – and that we will permit no definitive settlement of the Balkan question which in our opinion does not take into consideration the interests of Bulgaria.[[61]](#footnote-61)

Serbia and Greece were indeed developing a defensive alliance, and both had a common interest in keeping Bulgaria away from Macedonia and Thessalonica respectively. Berchtold attempted in vain to reconcile the Bulgarians and Romanians, but he was not helped by the German position, which officially preferred to court Greece, since Bulgaria seemed likely to remain pro-Russian. This was a misreading of the situation and of Austria’s strategic imperatives, which left Berchtold depressed. He continued to press Romania to show more appreciation of Bulgaria’s position, specifically the fact that Romania had been compensated with Silistra along the Bulgarian border, yet she still demanded more. At the same time Berchtold pressured Bulgaria with news of the Greek-Serb alliance, rumours of a Serb-Romanian alliance, and assurances that Vienna would work in Bulgaria’s interests if she did compromise over Macedonia. By late May 1913, Berchtold had come to accept that relations between Bucharest and Sofia were impossible for Austria to resolve on its own. The best he could manage was a limited pressure campaign, advising Romania not to join with Serbia in any war with Bulgaria. This, the Germans argued, was a hard sell since Romania would view such a war as an ideal opportunity to attack Bulgaria in the rear to seize the Dobruja.[[62]](#footnote-62)

The tangled diplomacy in this period can be difficult to follow, but it is clear that throughout June 1913, a pall of nervous excitement hung over the Balkans. The Balkan League had been successful – the Turks had been driven from Europe. But what was the utility of this alliance now, particularly when the Serb-Bulgarian core of the alliance were at odds over Macedonia? That Bulgaria was sufficiently upset with its spoils from the First Balkan War to instigate a Second Balkan War does not seem to have occurred to Berchtold. Yet, the Austrian Foreign Minister did work until the final moment to reach an accord between Bulgaria, Romania and the Triple Alliance. Only later in June, when German communications advised that Romania refused to speak any further with Bulgaria, and warned Vienna against applying too much pressure, did Berchtold come to realise that this coalition was impossible. On 28 June 1913 – exactly a year before a very different crisis exploded in Sarajevo – Berchtold offered to mediate between Bulgaria and Romania. Yet, the following day on 29 June in the middle of the night, Bulgarian forces crossed into Serbian territory and commenced the attack. The Second Balkan War had begun.[[63]](#footnote-63)

The war which followed lasted barely a month. Within a fortnight, indeed, Bulgaria was asking for an armistice. The war it had started for the sake of greater spoils had resulted instead in a dogpile from its neighbours. Serbia and Greece activated their alliance; Romania intervened to seize the Dobruja and, most shockingly, the Turks returned to the battlefield, this time to seize Adrianople and portions of Thrace the Bulgarians had occupied in the first conflict. Bulgaria suffered 93,000 casualties in this second war – more than the losses of its four opponents put together.[[64]](#footnote-64) Yet, as Bulgarian dreams collapsed, Austria-Hungary looked on as its Serbian rival made gains. Why, we may ask, did Vienna not take this opportunity to intervene directly, and nip the Serbian problem in the bud while her armies were fighting to the east? The answer amounted to a Habsburg confession that nobody was ready, or particularly willing.

The Archduke, on vacation in Vienna, urged Berchtold to hang back. Conrad, newly returned as chief of staff, was also away from Vienna, and only met Berchtold twice during the ensuing crisis. The Archduke had warned Berchtold that Conrad might seek his salvation in a ruinous war, so the Austrian Foreign Minister was extra careful not to allow it. To an extent, Berchtold had no choice. A new player had come onto the scene in Hungarian politics, Stefan Tisza. As Hungarian Prime Minister, Tisza could veto any policies he did not like, and what he truly loathed was a war in the Balkans which would upset the carefully balanced demographics of the Habsburg Empire. Tisza’s behaviour suggested that in a future crisis, Austria might be blocked from making any decisive foreign policy moves by its Hungarian partner, a scenario which boded ill for the Empire’s integrity. Indeed, this Hungarian veto proved even more problematic the following year, when Austria-Hungary found itself on the verge of war with Serbia.[[65]](#footnote-65)

In this Second Balkan War, it does seem that Vienna expected to have more time to make a decision. The Bulgarian army, with its impressive showing against the Turks in previous months, was expected to be able to hold its own for a time. In fact, the above statistics spoke for themselves. Sofia put out urgent feelers for a line of credit shortly after requesting an armistice. Vienna responded with 30 million francs, but this was barely enough to keep the country afloat. Indeed, the Central Powers proved more effective at courting Bulgaria through financial agreements, where more leverage could be applied. Over the following months, despite a last-minute French effort to raise the necessary capital, Bulgaria was bailed out by a German consortium, pulling her closer to the Triple Alliance. The Bulgarian parliament only approved the loan in mid-July 1914, two weeks after the assassination of the Archduke had pulled European attentions squarely back to the Balkans.

This set of circumstances meant that Bulgaria happened to be locked into the Triple Alliance just as Europe went to war. Romania, conversely, was now closer to Russia and the Entente. Paradoxically, by attempting to keep Bulgaria and Romania on side, Berchtold seems to have irritated Romania. The assumption that Romania was secure in the alliance, while Bulgaria was a Russian satellite, was shattered by the end of this brief war. Just as the final details of the Bulgarian loan were being hammered out, in fact, the Russian Tsar visited the King of Romania, signifying that a diplomatic revolution of sorts had occurred.[[66]](#footnote-66) This was something of a change for Romanian statesmen, who had spent the preceding decades in secret alignment with the Triple Alliance. Since 1883, indeed, Bucharest had been a secret partner of the alliance, its irridentist energies directed towards Russian Bessarabia and Bulgarian Dobruja. However, three million ethnic Romanians also lived in Hungarian ruled Transylvania, three times as many as in Bessarabia. This suggested that if Romania was lured from its Triple Alliance, the consequences could be strategically disastrous for the Habsburgs. Not only would Romanian nationalist agitation be focused on this region – supported by a Romanian National Party within the Hungarian parliament – but if Russia could reach an accord with Romania, she could conceivably use her territory to launch an attack against the less fortified east Hungarian border.[[67]](#footnote-67)

Romania’s military prestige enjoyed a marked boost in the aftermath of the Second Balkan War. Her armies had played a key role in the dogpile on Bulgaria, selecting the right opportunity to strike as her foe was assaulted on several fronts. Romanian armies led the direct invasion aimed at the Bulgarian capital, reaching within seven miles of Sofia, and forcing the government to sue for peace. The Treaty of Bucharest was signed on 10 August 1913, marking an official end to the Balkan Wars, at least for the moment.[[68]](#footnote-68) That the treaty was negotiated in the Romanian capital, with ambassadors from the great powers in Bucharest representing their concerns, was a striking symbol of the country’s rise to prominence. Once Romania acquired what it wanted at the peace table – above all Dobruja – it adhered to a more moderate position. Bulgaria’s critical weakness at this juncture, and the exhaustion of Greece and Serbia, rendered Romania the most powerful state in the Balkans. Within weeks of the peace, the great powers increased their efforts to court Romania to their alliance.[[69]](#footnote-69)

For Romanian statesmen, Russia was not the source of their cultural inspiration. Many of their leaders had been educated in, and looked up to, France. Indeed, the Romanian Liberal Party, led by the wily and unscrupulous Ioan Bratianu, was believed to be far more Francophile than its counterparts. This party came to power in January 1914. Yet even before that, in anticipation of Romania sliding out of the Triple Alliance, Berchtold authorised a mission to Bucharest in October 1913. The goal was to gauge Romania’s policy, and see if it remained committed to its old obligations. This mission was a failure, and the sobering conclusions of the Habsburg agent sent to Bucharest sewed seeds of doubt regarding Romania’s stance. If she could not be relied upon, this complicated decades of established Habsburg assumptions. Another tactic was attempted instead: that of improving the domestic condition of Romanians under Hungarian rule. Yet, Stefan Tisza refused to countenance any conciliatory policy, no matter how much it galled the Austrians or frustrated the Germans. Watching the inconsequential debates to this end in the Hungarian parliament, Britain’s ambassador in Budapest reported that ‘No one Hungarian speaker, whether government or opposition, was ready to sacrifice the idea of a homogenous Hungarian state, while on the other hand the Romanians cannot accept this principle of a united and indivisible state or nation.’[[70]](#footnote-70) Angered by these efforts to stifle Romanian national expression, it was possible that Romania’s government would identify with Serbia’s anger at Serbs similarly stifled in Habsburg lands. In her assessment of Romanian attitudes before 1914, the historian Barbara Jelavich wrote on the situation by this point:

Identifying Serbia as their main opponent, the Habsburg leaders had hoped during the Balkan Wars to maintain good relations with both Romania and Bulgaria: the Second Balkan War not only made this objective impossible to achieve, it led to closer relations between Romania and Serbia - two states which had claims on Habsburg territory now seemed to be co-operating. Should they join a Balkan league, which the Habsburg government feared would be organized by Russia, the monarchy would be faced with hostile powers in both the south and the east.[[71]](#footnote-71)

However, the situation was predictably not so simple. Bratianu – as he would later demonstrate during the First World War and the Paris Peace Conference – was nothing if not an opportunist, and to Romania, the Central Powers were still the stronger military faction. It would be immensely dangerous to place Romania’s future in Russia’s hands, or to rely on the Entente to defend Romanian territory. Bratianu had thus given non-committal answers to Sazonov’s inquiries on Romania’s diplomatic position. The best Sazonov could wrest from him was confessions of his dissatisfaction with Romania’s current position, accompanied by claims that Romania would tend to her best interests if war came. This was far from a declaration of intent to join the Entente, but the Habsburgs were nonetheless anxious. Too much was on the line to leave Romania to chance. In the spring and summer of 1914 then, we see an increased Habsburg desire to formulate a plan which would reaffirm Romania’s adherence to the Triple Alliance.

As we will see, Austrian documents written up before the assassination – such as the Matscheko Memorandum of 14 June 1914 – emphasised Romania’s centrality to Austrian strategic planning. This memorandum was heavy with references to the strategic value of Romania to Vienna, and warned of the dangers of Romanian-Serb cooperation. King Carol of Romania – hailing from the Hohenzollern dynasty ruling in Germany – was perceived to be in a weak political position. His pro-German sentiments were believed in the minority; public opinion in Romania was pro-French and anti-Habsburg, and King Carol would sooner go along with this tide than rally against it. Following the assassination, the Matscheko memorandum was modified to underline the Serbian threat, which was linked to that from Romania. Until Serbian irridentism was crushed, Romania could never be persuaded to declare itself, the thinking went.

Bratianu was in fact more interested in leveraging Romania’s newfound advantages to establish a free hand in its relations. Rather than being seduced by the Entente, in other words, Romania had acquired sufficient power and prestige to stand aloof as a neutral party from whatever conflict that might follow. The Triple Alliance was, after all, a defensive alliance, and as it was this camp that made the declarations of war in August 1914, Romania was freed from its obligations. A similar decision was made in Italy, yet Romania was arguably more immediately strategically concerning for Vienna, since Romanian armies were in a better position to respond to any attack on Serbia with an invasion of Transylvania. Berchtold was correct to see that the situation in Romania in changed, but he was wrong to see this change as complete. Romania’s victories granted it the power to declare its neutrality, not its hostility. Such hostility would only come two years into the war, and to the likely satisfaction of the Central Powers, such opportunism proved disastrous for Bucharest.[[72]](#footnote-72)

The Balkan Wars had changed everything for Vienna. Its enemies were stronger and emboldened, its own prestige was damaged, and its diplomatic arrangements came under severe threat. Even the German alliance came under strain. Disagreements between Vienna and Berlin over how to treat the new status quo undermined their efforts to cooperate. Kaiser Wilhelm took a pro-Greek and pro-Romanian stance. He sent a telegram congratulating King Carol of Romania for his great victory in the war, in effect giving his blessing for the Treaty of Bucharest, where Vienna wished to negotiate its terms further. Wilhelm’s view of Bulgaria as a defeated Russian satellite, and his assumption that Greece and Romania could be courted through dynastic connections twinned with a poor understanding of national interests, hampered Habsburg efforts to pursue its own diplomatic initiatives. Worse, despite Berchtold’s attempts to underline Serbia’s threat to Vienna – portraying the threat from Belgrade as the Austrian equivalent of the Royal Navy’s threat to Berlin, for instance – the Germans failed to see matters in this way.[[73]](#footnote-73)

Narratives of the First World War so often emphasise the German sense of encirclement. Berlin became convinced, it is claimed, that unless she acted against this ring of enemies around her soon, the imbalance would be too great. This argument will be considered in more detail, but we should ask whether it was more accurate for Austria by late 1913. Her enemies had grown in power and number. Her allies were noncommittal or contrarian. Her own powers and prestige were much reduced. This siege mentality helps to explain Austria’s issuance of two striking ultimatums in October 1913 – one against Serbia to evacuate Northern Albania, and one against Greece to evacuate Southern Albania – behaviour which succeeded where diplomacy had failed. Indeed, Austria’s most successful diplomatic initiatives were arguably those that entailed an ultimatum, backed by a threat of force. This had been done in March 1909 at the height of the Bosnian Annexation Crisis as well.

Thus, as the European Concert lost its utility, and as the status quo was killed on its doorstep, Vienna came to appreciate the value of an ultimatum as a tool of statecraft. It was to be expected that if Serbia attempted to challenge Austria again, or if she struck a blow to her interests, another ultimatum would be used to deal with the situation. Yet, the lesson of ultimatums was only partially learned. The device had worked for Vienna for a crucial reason above all – Russia, and the other European powers, either supported the logic of the ultimatum, or were unable to fight against it. But just as Austria had learned lessons, Russia had learned lessons of its own. After having relented in the face of Austrian pressure several times, the Tsar was assured that Russia could not back down again, particularly if its Serbian partner came under attack. All Europe needed was for a particularly crisis to arrive which would put these assumptions and lessons to the test. Unfortunately for the world, Archduke Franz Ferdinand would prove the final ingredient to this perfect storm when he decided to travel to Sarajevo.[[74]](#footnote-74)

1. Quoted in Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, p. 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. David G. Herrmann, ‘The Paralysis of Italian Strategy in the Italian-Turkish War, 1911-1912,’ *English Historical Review*, 104, 411 (Apr., 1989), 332-356; 332. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Mulligan, *Origins*, pp. 69-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid*, pp. 72-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Herrmann, ‘The Paralysis of Italian Strategy in the Italian-Turkish War, 1911-1912,’ 334. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid*, 335. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. W. David Wrigley, ‘Germany and the Turco-Italian War, 1911-1912,’ *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 11, 3 (May, 1980), 313- 338; 314. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, pp. 245-246. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See *Ibid*, pp. 246-247. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid*, pp. 247-248. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Herrmann, ‘The Paralysis of Italian Strategy in the Italian-Turkish War, 1911-1912,’ 338-339. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Ibid*, 340. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Ibid*, 341-342. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Quoted in *Ibid*, 343. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Ibid*, 345. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Ibid*, 346-349. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Ibid*, 350-353. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See Michael Paris, ‘The First Air Wars – North Africa and the Balkans, 1911-13,’ *Journal of Contemporary History*, 26, 1 (Jan., 1991), 97-109; 97-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Wrigley, ‘Germany and the Turco-Italian War, 1911-1912,’ 324-330. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Herrmann, ‘The Paralysis of Italian Strategy in the Italian-Turkish War, 1911-1912,’ 354-355. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Mulligan, *Origins*, pp. 120-121. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, pp. 250-251. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Wrigley, ‘Germany and the Turco-Italian War, 1911-1912,’ 330-332. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For these Greek operations see William Peter Kaldis, ‘Background for Conflict: Greece, Turkey, and the Aegean Islands, 1912-1914,’ *Journal of Modern History*, 51, 2, (Jun., 1979), pp. D1119-D1146. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For these Balkan operations see Christopher Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, pp. 252-255. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See Andrew Rossos, ‘Serbian-Bulgarian Relations, 1903-1914,’ *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 23, 4 (December 1981), 394-408; 394-398. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Quoted in *Ibid*, 402. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Ibid*, 403. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *Ibid*, 403-404. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, pp. 257-260. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *Ibid*, pp. 261-262. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *Ibid*, p. 263. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *Ibid*, pp. 264-265. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Wilhelm II’s Memorandum, 11 November 1912 in Mombauer, *Documents*, pp. 76-77. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. 23 November 1912, Kokovstov’s account of a meeting between the Tsar and his military advisers in Mombauer, *Documents*, pp. 81-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 266-270. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Russian concerns at Bulgarian designs on the Straits and Constantinople are examined by Ronald Bobroff, ‘Behind the Balkan Wars: Russian Policy toward Bulgaria and the Turkish Straits, 1912- 13,’ *Russian Review*, 59, 1 (Jan., 2000), 76-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Ibid*, 77-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *Ibid*, 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. *Ibid*, 83-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. *Ibid*, 88-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, pp. 271-273. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See Williamson Jr., *Austria-Hungary and the Origins of the First World War*, pp. 115-124. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, pp. 282-284. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. R. J. Crampton, ‘The Decline of the Concert of Europe in the Balkans, 1913-1914,’ *Slavonic and East European Review*, 52, 128 (Jul., 1974), 393-419; 393-396. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
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47. Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, pp, 287-288. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Crampton, ‘The Decline of the Concert of Europe in the Balkans, 1913-1914,’ 398-399. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. *Ibid*, 402-405. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. *Ibid*, 406-412. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Quoted in *Ibid*, 413. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. *Ibid*, 414-416. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
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54. *Ibid*, 418-419. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Richard C. Hall, *The Balkan Wars 1912-1913* (London, 2002), Chapter Six. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
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57. 31 January 1913, Cartwright to Nicolson in Mombauer, *Documents*, p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. 23 May 1913, Cartwright to Nicolson in *Ibid*, p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
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60. Margareta A. Faissler, ‘Austria-Hungary and the Disruption of the Balkan League,’ *Slavonic and East European Review*, 19, 53/54, (1939 - 1940), 141-157. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
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63. *Ibid*, 151-157. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
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67. Barbara Jelavich, ‘Romania in the First World War: The Pre-War Crisis, 1912-1914,’ *International History Review*, 14, 3 (Aug., 1992), 441-451; 441-444. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
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69. See Richard C. Hall, *Balkan Wars*, Chapter Seven: ‘Treaty of Bucharest.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. See Jelavich, ‘Romania in the First World War: The Pre-War Crisis, 1912-1914,’ 445-446. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. *Ibid*, 448. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. *Ibid*, 449-451. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Williamson Jr., *Austria-Hungary and the Origins of the First World War*, pp. 149-152. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. *Ibid*, pp. 152-155. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)