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Balkan States and Great Powers – Conflicts and Disputes in the First Half of the 20th Century

Abstract

The author analyzes the policy of great powers towards the Balkan countries and nations, through the two Balkan wars (1912, 1913), the Great War and World War II until the formation of the Cold War order after it. The author asks questions about the geopolitical role of the great powers that influenced the construction of a lasting peace system in the Balkans during the period in question. The leaders of the Balkan independence movements realized that they had to rely on the assistance of great powers in their endeavours, hence the “original sin” of international relations in the Balkans became the growing influence of stronger players, the scale of which is unmatched in any other region of the Old Continent. The support given to Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece or Albania in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by the great powers in their struggle for independence and sovereignty extended to all areas of international relations after the constitution of nation-states and continues to accompany them to this day, taking various forms. It must be hypothesized that the influence of the great powers has had a destructive effect on the construction of a lasting peace system in the Balkans.

Keywords: The Balkans, international relations, wars, ethnic conflicts, great powers, the Great War, the Second World War

Introduction

According to the majority of historians and political scientists, the Balkans are regarded as one of more interesting regions not only of the Old Continent but also of the world. The location of the Peninsula enables a strong controlling geopolitical player or a group of states to influence politically, economically, socially and militarily both South-Eastern Europe, Asia Minor as well as Central-Eastern and Eastern (including the Caucasus region), and indirectly also the Middle East¹. The geopolitical position of the Balkans

¹ D. Kolev, *Tajna diplomatija i interesne sfere: primer Balkanskog Poluostrva*, “Časopis za ekonomiju i tržišne komunikacije” 2016, vol. 6, iss. 2, pp. 367–368.



had a decisive impact on the attitude of the great powers towards them. All other characteristics of the Balkan Peninsula region, or putting it more broadly, of South-Eastern Europe, such as historical contradictions, the existence of still open conflicts and crises, ethnic and religious cultural diversity, “Balkan crypto-historical trends”², the bridging character (connecting Europe and Asia), the late emergence of nation states, an exceptionally short democratic tradition, the lack of clear ethnic distinctions, the existence on a relatively small area of several states and twenty nations, as well as national minorities, were and still remain skilfully used to keep the Balkan peoples in a state of conflict, political crises and territorial disputes. The palette of great powers changed over the centuries. Depending on the circumstances, they actively tried to influence the Balkan nations and states in order to pursue their own strategic interests, in accordance with the principle of “divide and rule”³.

It was assumed that in the turbulent history of the Balkans and the Balkan states, the great players occupied (and still occupy) a special position, defining dividing lines between nations, and creating the so-called Balkan order, regardless of the historical era. Yet, were the Balkans and still remain a kind of a “battlefield” for the great powers? The Balkans, regarded as an important region for international relations, certainly took a crucial position in the European politics in the second half of the 19th century and in the first two decades of the 20th century. Nonetheless, the subsequent years, in particular the inter-war period, do not entitle to pose even a preliminary hypothesis that the Balkans occupied a special place in the politics of the great powers of that time. Yet, their role increased again (but briefly) due to the events taking place at the end of the Second World War, directly related to the civil war in Greece and the United States’ involvement in the conflict. On the basis of the Greek war, the Truman Doctrine was proclaimed, which had a significant impact on the final division of the world into two opposing blocs⁴, and whose conventional border was defined by Winston Churchill and was supposed to run from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Adriatic Coast in the south. Therefore, it should be assumed that the first half of the 20th century (at least until 1918) is considered the “Balkan era” in European international relations. In the period under discussion, some terms for this region were created, such as: “Balkan boiler” or “Balkan powder keg”, which are still existent in the journalistic and scientific narrative as a fundamental determinant describing international relations and geopolitical arrangement for the region of South-Eastern Europe.

Geopolitical Chessboard in the Balkans after the Balkan Wars

As a result of the First Balkan War, important geopolitical changes took place on the map of the Peninsula, which aggravated during the next military conflict. The Second Balkan War permanently conflicted the Balkan states and nations, preventing any agreement

² The Balkans are perceived as a “barrel of gunpowder”, a “frontier of civilisation” (between East and West, Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian civilisation), a “clash of worlds”, or a region through which the “storms of history” pass. Numerous events from the most contemporary history may lead to the conclusion that the modern Balkans are not a safe life zone, as the geopolitical interests of many countries collide in their territory, and analysts often interpret the essence of certain events differently, especially crises and conflicts, *ibidem*, p. 361.

³ M. Stojković, *Novi geopolitički položaj Balkana i Jugoslavije*, “Vojno delo” 2009, br. 6, p. 76.

⁴ T. Wituch, *Balkany w Europie XX w.*, “Dzieje Najnowsze” 1998, year XXX, vol. 2, p. 3.

between them in the long run. Despite the signing of the peace agreement in Bucharest (10 August 1913)⁵, the situation in the Balkans did not stabilise. The position of Russia was not strengthened and St. Petersburg once again failed. Russia lost its valuable ally, Bulgaria, to the central states that were allied with Romania, having considerable influence in the Ottoman Empire⁶.

In the changed geopolitical situation, Greece tried to pursue a neutral policy, but with a clear leaning towards Berlin. This was due to King Constantine's relationship with the court of William II and the influence of numerous pro-German supporters in the political and military spheres of the Greek state. Furthermore, the Greek political elites wanted to preserve the gains brought to Athens by the Balkan Wars⁷. In the face of the changing geopolitical situation on the Peninsula, the significant influence and growing position of the central powers, as well as the ineffective attitude of the Entente, Athens believed that the best solution for Greece would be to maintain neutrality with a benevolent orientation towards the central states. Serbia and Montenegro remained the only allies of the Entente in the Balkans. The establishment of the protectorate of the great powers, namely Albania, a monarchy with limited sovereignty, became another focal point antagonising attitudes and international relations on the Balkan Peninsula⁸. The Albanian state was only theoretically an independent entity, with a foreign ruler imposed on it by the great powers, derived from the German aristocracy. A state torn apart by clan battles was not able to create efficient state structures in a relatively short period of time. No borders were set, which were to be agreed upon with the participation of Albania's neighbours and the powers⁹. The Albanian clans became the ideal force to control Serbia and Greece. Paid for by Bulgaria and Austria-Hungary, they carried out irregular activities, destabilising the situation in the border strip, Kosovo and Metohiji. This led to numerous military interventions (especially Serbian ones), which in turn met with an immediate and sharp diplomatic response from Austria-Hungary and Germany. The actions of the Albanians not only led to the escalation of the Albanian-Serbian conflict, but also prevented the stabilisation of the situation in Serbia and affected regional security¹⁰.

Serbia, which won in the Balkan wars, failed to achieve the primary goal of the war, which was to gain access to the Adriatic Sea. Therefore, its policy was aimed at maintaining the *status quo* and – in the future – expanding its territory to the west. In the situation in which the Serbian state found itself after 1913, this was theoretically possible only thanks to the expansion into the territory occupied by the Albanians. Austria-Hungary, which for a long time was trying to make Serbia dependent, stood in the way of Serbian intentions. Yet, Belgrade did not intend to submit to the dictates of Vienna. By associating with the

⁵ Under this treaty, Romania acquired southern Dobrudja, Serbia – a part of the former Bulgarian Macedonia, Greece retained Western and Central Macedonia, and acquired East Macedonia. A separate agreement was concluded (29 September 1913) by Turkey and Bulgaria which lost the areas of Eastern Thrace seized in the First Balkan War.

⁶ E. Weibel, *Histoire et géopolitique des Balkans de 1800 à nos jours*, Paris 2002, p. 325.

⁷ A. Krzak, *Wielka Wojna na Bałkanach. Działania militarne i polityczne podczas I wojny światowej 1914–1918*, Częstochowa 2016, p. 56.

⁸ B. Jelavich, *Historia Bałkanów*, vol. II: *Wiek XX*, Kraków 2005, pp. 114–115.

⁹ E. Weibel, *Histoire et géopolitique des Balkans de 1800 à nos jours*, Paris 2002, pp. 303–322; T. Czekalski, J. Hauziński, J. Leśny, *Historia Albanii*, Wrocław 2009, pp. 187–200.

¹⁰ A. Krzak, *Wielka Wojna na Bałkanach...*, p. 59.

Entente, it counted on the support from the Western powers in diplomatic struggle and possible armed conflict with a powerful neighbour. Meanwhile, the military and political elites of the Habsburg monarchy perceived Serbia's actions and ambitions as a growing threat to the continued existence of Austria-Hungary. The idea of the unification of the Southern Slavs and the position of the Kingdom of Serbia as one of the conquerors of the Ottoman Empire must have aroused concern in the circles of the highest state authorities of Vienna.

The stabilisation of the region was also hindered by the tense relations between the powers that formed two opposing blocs at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries – the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy) and the Triple Entente (France, Great Britain and Russia). Germany's influence in the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria, and Austria-Hungary's influence in Albania were seen not only as a threat to the sovereignty of Serbia and Montenegro, but also as a threat to the interests of the Entente¹¹. In addition, the human potential, mineral resources and agricultural production of the Balkan states were of great importance for the leaders of the conflict camps in the upcoming clash. That is why the great powers once again decided to play the Balkan card in an old, proven way, winning in their favour the existing conflicts between the conflicted Balkan states.

As already mentioned, after the Treaty of Bucharest, there was an illusory peace on the Peninsula¹². Nevertheless, already in 1913 the division into two camps was clearly outlined – the winners (Serbia, Montenegro, Greece and Romania) and the defeated (Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire), who were eager for revenge¹³. The winning countries: Montenegro, Greece and Serbia were determined to maintain the *status quo* at all costs. On the other side, however, there were also the Ottoman Porte and Bulgaria¹⁴, which considered themselves as disadvantaged, and aimed to revise the existing arrangements and borders.

Germany successfully competing with Great Britain pursued an offensive and effective policy in the Middle East, which resulted in a well-established influence and alliance with the Ottoman Empire. It was essential for Germany to maintain its position in the Padishah state to secure its control over the Balkans as a bridge between Europe and Asia Minor. Thus, the strategic goal of German diplomacy was to limit the influence of Russia and its Western and Balkan allies, which could be realised by using conflicts between the Balkan countries. For this purpose, Berlin gave freedom to act to Austria-Hungary, especially in the area of supporting irredentist movements against the internal security of Serbia, whose permanent destabilisation was in the hands of the Central powers (while effectively weakening the position of the Entente in the Balkans).

With the end of the Balkan wars, Germany activated its policy towards Sofia, directing it to draw an "offended" Bulgaria into the coalition of the central states, which after the defeat of the Second Balkan Inter-Alliance War was deprived of its possessions after beating the Ottoman Empire¹⁵. The humiliation suffered by the Bulgarians, along with the

¹¹ J. Dąbrowski, *Wielka Wojna 1914–1918 na podstawie najnowszych źródeł*, vol. 1, Warszawa 1937, pp. 45–47.

¹² M. Tanty, *Konflikty bałkańskie w latach 1878–1919*, Warszawa 1968, p. 122.

¹³ J. Dąbrowski, *Wielka Wojna...*, vol. 1, p. 44.

¹⁴ H. Batowski, *Państwa Bałkańskie 1800–1923. Zarys historii dyplomatycznej i rozwoju terytorialnego*, Kraków 1938, p. 233.

¹⁵ M. Tanty, *Konflikty bałkańskie...*, p. 120.

betrayal of hitherto allied Russia during the negotiations in London and Bucharest, “pushed” them into the embrace of Berlin and Vienna. This in turn predicted another military conflict with Serbia and Greece. The Serbian-Bulgarian antagonism was carefully exploited by Viennese and German diplomacy, with almost complete indifference from Russia and Western countries¹⁶.

Berlin and Vienna, skilfully making use of the hatred of the Bulgarians, made their retaliatory demands mostly against Serbia¹⁷, since Greece was a particularly important element of the Balkan mosaic for the Second Reich. Berlin’s policy was therefore aimed at winning the favour of Athens. This was also the purpose of discouraging Sofia from making revisionist demands on Athens.

After the end of the Balkan wars, the Greek-Ottoman relations were no less hostile than relations between Greece and Bulgaria. In spring 1914, they became more severe due to problems related to the exchange of refugees to the degree that there was a real danger of another military conflict. Fortunately, the danger was eliminated by the mediation of Berlin, for which the conflict between an ally (Ottoman Empire) and a prospective coalition partner (Greece) was not advantageous, as it hit the vital interests of the Second Reich – political, military and economic ones¹⁸. Although the Greeks had an alliance with Serbia, the relations between these two countries in 1914 should be considered as at least tepid¹⁹. The reasons for such a situation should be sought in the Greek attempts to recover the hitherto agreements²⁰, which obviously could not meet with the approval of Serbia. Furthermore, Belgrade did not forget the conservative and procrastinating policy of Greece in fulfilling its treaty obligations during the inter-alliance war. Hence, the only player on the Balkan chessboard that was in alliance with Serbia was Montenegro²¹.

Another player who appeared during the Conference of Ambassadors in London was Italy. Rome, a coalition partner of Austria-Hungary and Germany (until 1915), sought to strengthen and expand its influence on the eastern Adriatic Coast and the Aegean and Ionian Basins, which ultimately became a fact after the end of the Great War²². Rome’s involvement in the political games on the Peninsula, primarily through the support of the northern clans in Albania, led to the creation of another flashpoint in the Balkan region, as the Kingdom of Italy’s actions conflicted with the political interests of both Greece and Serbia.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 122.

¹⁷ This was clearly illustrated in the opinion of one of the American politicians included in the work of the former Austrian consul Dr Josef Goričar: “It is perfectly natural that these two Christian nations, so closely related to each other by blood, language, religion and history, and thousands of aims in common, should form a Zollbund, which would not injure the interest of anyone, least of all Austria and Germany”, J. Goričar, *Political Intrigues of Austria & Germany against Balkan States*, New York 1915, p. 8.

¹⁸ *Za balkanskimi frontami Prvoī mirovoī voīny*, V.N. Vinogradov (ed.), Moskva 2002.

¹⁹ The Greek-Serbian Alliance of 1913 was concluded for the period of 10 years and was directed against Bulgaria, S. Cosmin, *L’Entente et de la Grèce pendant la Grande guerre (1914–1915)*, Paris 1926, pp. 163–165.

²⁰ N. Korsun, *Balkanskiī front Mirovoī Voīny, 1914–1918 gg.*, Moskva 1939, p. 13.

²¹ E.C. Helmreich, *Montenegro and the Formation of the Balkan League*, “The Slavonic Review” 1937, no. XV/44, pp. 432–433.

²² The activity of Italian diplomacy in the Aegean Sea and Albania was often discussed during meetings between Austro-Hungarian and German diplomats. Austria-Hungary was concerned about Italian interference in internal conflicts in Albania, W.C. Askew, *Austro-Italian antagonism, 1896–1914*, in: L. Parker Wallace, W.C. Askew, *Power, Public Opinion and Diplomacy. Essays in Honor of Eber Malcolm Carroll by his Students*, Durham NC 1959, pp. 209–210.

Undoubtedly, Albania, as well as Kosovo and Metohija, became one of the main “flashpoints” from the end of the Balkan wars to the present day. Albania *anno domini* 1913 was a young country that was just beginning to form the foundations of statehood. It faced many difficulties, further compounded by rivalry on the Belgrade-Vienna-Rome axis. The granting of independence on 29 July 1913 allowed Albanians to formally gain subjectivity on the international arena²³. However, the limitations of the Organic Statute adopted by the Conference of Ambassadors in London (Constitution) meant that no important decisions on foreign, domestic and financial matters could be made without the consent of the great powers²⁴.

The Balkan Wars undoubtedly brought Serbia and Montenegro a victory and at the same time had a major impact on the Southern Slavs living in the Habsburg monarchy. The sense of unity, pride and solidarity was further strengthened, as was noted with concern in Vienna. The South Slavs and Greeks won the battle of the Ottoman Empire lasting over 400 years, which gave them hope of success also with the second Austro-Hungarian conqueror²⁵. Meanwhile, Vienna, instead of trying to alleviate the growing internal conflict, further inflamed it with its decisions, including suspending constitutional freedoms in Slavonia in March 1912. At the same time, reliable methods were used, consisting in antagonising Croats with Serbs²⁶. In the monarchy, it was believed that the best solution was to maintain – as one of the Austro-Hungarian politicians claimed – a “balanced state of mutual discontent”²⁷. On the other hand, the actions of the Serbs were aimed at strengthening the separatist aspirations of the South Slavic subjects of Franz Joseph I, and were aimed at supporting the aspirations of the Croats both in the political struggle and in the field of underground activity²⁸.

Hence, the Habsburg Monarchy had no choice but to conduct an active anti-Serbian policy, which proved to be an effective action to a considerable extent. The creation of an Albanian state (which was one of the initiatives of the Austro-Hungarian diplomacy) blocked the strategic aspirations of Serbs²⁹ to gain access to the Adriatic Sea. Albania became a tool in the hands of the Habsburgs to exert influence on Serbia³⁰. In autumn 1913, Belgrade

²³ On 7 December 1912, after the National Assembly in Vlora, the Albanian government was formed, headed by Ismail Qemal, who proclaimed the declaration of independence. Nevertheless, it was not recognised by both the Ottoman state and the Balkan League states. On 17 December 1912 Albania was granted autonomy, which became the basis for a decision to establish an independent Albanian state a few months later, T. Czekalski, *Albania*, Warszawa 2003, p. 39; P. Qazimi, *Albanija: strani vojni utjecaji: (1912.–1991.)*, Zagreb 2013, pp. 45–47.

²⁴ J. Hauziński, J. Leśny, *Historia Albanii*, Wrocław 2009, p. 212.

²⁵ H. Batowski, *Państwa bałkańskie 1800–1923...*, p. 225.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ O. Jaszi, *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy*, Chicago 1961, p. 115.

²⁸ An example is the cooperation of Croatian and Serbian political groups during the elections to Sabor in 1911. The cooperation of the underground groups of patriots from Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia is best illustrated by the support given to the Bosnian Croat, Luce Jukic, who on 8 June 1912 carried out an unsuccessful attack on the ban of Croatia – Slavk Cuvaj, V. Dediđer, *Sarajewo 1914*, vol. 2, Łódź 1984, p. 45.

²⁹ R.A. Kann, *The Habsburg Empire*, New York 1957, p. 37, 48, 52, 74 et passim; L. Namier, *Vanished Supremacies 1812–1918. The Downfall of the Habsburg Monarchy*, London 1962, pp. 154–158.

³⁰ M. Gutić, *Oružani sukobi na srpsko-albanskoj granici u jeseni 1913 godine*, “Vojnoistorijski Glasnik”, January–April 1985, current year 1, p. 229. According to Max Ronge’s account, since mid-November 1912, Albanians were supported with arms supplies, while the officers of the General Staff Register Office (Austro-Hungarian military intelligence) made several reconnaissance trips to the border with Serbia, M. Ronge, *Dwanaście lat służby wywiadowczej*, Warszawa 1992, p. 43.

found out about this when some Albanian clans attacked the Serbian border in Kosovo. After the Serbian army left Albania (after the decision of the great powers), the Albanian paramilitary groups, encouraged by the support of Vienna and Berlin, began diversionary activities along the uncharted Albanian-Serbian border. Thus, the growing Serbian-Albanian conflict entered a new phase, as the aim of the Albanians' actions was to destabilise the border areas, to break up the organising administration, to seize the right bank of the Vardar and part of Metohija, and to maintain the occupied area³¹, and then to internationalise the crisis, to bring about the intervention of the great powers in favour of Albania. As a result of the military actions taken, Albanian forces achieved considerable successes, threatening the Serbian rule in Kosovo and Metohija³². The Albanian rebellion also received support from Bulgaria. The battles with the Serbian army were participated by troops and guerilla groups led by Bulgarian officers and Comitajas, among others, Lieutenant Colonel Markov, Petr Chaulyev and Jane Sandanski³³. During the rebellion, the Albanian people and rebels committed numerous acts of brutality and war crimes, killing prisoners and the Serbian people, burning villages and robbing possessions³⁴.

Eventually, the revolt was suppressed, and the Serbian army troops re-entered northern Albania. Belgrade's military action was met with a severe diplomatic response from Vienna³⁵, forcing Serbs to withdraw from northern Albania. In addition to the diplomatic support provided by Austria-Hungary to the Albanian rebels, they received significant financial and military assistance³⁶. The participation of Bulgarian officers and Macedonian Komitadji was one of the elements of this assistance. According to Max Ronge (a high-rank officer of the Austro-Hungarian intelligence community), a few months later, Albanian armed groups, in cooperation with Macedonian Chetniks, undertook diversionary actions, again destabilising the situation in Kosovo. At the same time, the representatives of the Albanian authorities during the conference in London proposed to a delegation of Bulgarian diplomats to form an anti-Serbian alliance³⁷.

Austria-Hungary's participation in the Albanian irredentism is also indicated by Vienna's proposal to Rome, asking Italy whether it would take part in a preventive war against the Serbs. The Italian authorities replied that the *casus foederis* did not take place in this case³⁸. In view of such a position of Italy, Austria-Hungary did not take armed action against Serbia. Vienna's efforts and the polls of allies clearly indicated that Austria-Hungary was aiming for a violent solution to the conflict with Belgrade³⁹.

³¹ M. Gutić, *Oružani sukobi na srpsko-albanskoj granici...*, p. 232.

³² A. Krzak, *Wielka Wojna na Balkanach...*, p. 79; T. Czekalski, *Układ Toptani-Pašić. Relacje albańsko-serbskie w pierwszym roku Wielkiej Wojny*, in: *I Wojna Światowa na Balkanach. Działania militarne i polityczne w latach 1914–1918. Studia i materiały*, A. Krzak (ed.), Szczecin 2014, p. 40.

³³ M. Gutić, *Oružani sukobi na srpsko-albanskoj granici...*, p. 245.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 253–256.

³⁵ On 18 October, Vienna issued a strong diplomatic note demanding an immediate cessation of military activities and the withdrawal from the territory of Albania, H. Batowski, *Państwa bałkańskie 1800–1923...*, p. 234; M.N. Vego, *Austro-Hungarian Naval Policy 1904–14*, London–Portland 1996, p. 161; M. Gutić, *Oružani sukobi na srpsko-albanskoj granici...*, pp. 262–265; J. Aulneau, *La Turquie et la guerre*, Paris 1916, p. 258.

³⁶ A. Puto, *L'indépendance Albanaise et la diplomatie des grandes puissances 1912–1914*, Tirana 1982, pp. 453–456.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 445–446.

³⁸ H. Batowski, *Państwa bałkańskie 1800–1923...*, p. 234.

³⁹ A. Krzak, *Wielka Wojna na Balkanach...*, p. 81.

According to some historians, inter alia, E. Zöllner, Vienna's involvement (indirect) into Balkan wars was a serious mistake. It would have been better if the diplomacy of Austria-Hungary had taken a super-arbiter position⁴⁰.

In 1914, the Balkans were again at the centre of European politics, due to the growing conflict between the Entente and the Central powers. The rivalry between the great powers was compounded by the antagonisms among the small Balkan states resulting from the ambitions of their political elites. Therefore, the attack in Sarajevo should be treated to some extent as an isolated case, a part of the "global strategic atmosphere" that characterised the period. As early as the in the 17th century, the Balkans were generally considered as the "Orient", but after the Balkan Wars they became a part of a distant but still Europe ("pre-modern", not "repairable"). This conviction about the barbarian Balkan peoples, which was confirmed in the opinion of Western politicians and the international community, was the starting point for creating a stereotype (still present in international relations), according to which the war in the Balkans is the rule and peace is the exception. Attempts to build any geopolitical and security architecture are doomed to failure due to the numerous conflicts between the Balkan states.

Great War – Old and New Antagonisms

A key event for the Balkan states of the second decade of the 20th century (as well as Europe and the world) was the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophia on 28 June 1914. The reaction of the Austro-Hungarian diplomacy after the assassination and subsequent death of the heir to the throne was to accuse Serbia of participating in the plot⁴¹. Vienna finally got an argument that was supposed to enable the Serbian question to be resolved. Austria-Hungary was not convinced of the military action because, in the beginning, the politicians in Vienna thought that diplomatic action would bring greater benefits. Both the Austrian and German military circles did not like it. Nevertheless, Austria-Hungary's position changed after the assurance of Wilhelm II that he was prepared for war with Russia⁴². At the same time, the German monarch warned Austria-Hungary that the dispute with the Serbs should be ended as soon as possible so as not to lead to a common war. Yet, in Vienna, there was a discussion on the next steps against Serbia. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Leopold Berchtold, believed that the army should immediately enter Serbian territory in order to support diplomatic action. The chief of the General Staff, General Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, was against this solution and he believed that attacking Serbia with not supplemented reservists would be risky. The decision to take military action was also opposed by Hungarian Prime Minister István Tisza, who opted for deferring military action⁴³. In the end, Vienna issued an ultimatum that was unacceptable to the Serbs.

⁴⁰ E. Zöllner, *Geschichte Österreichs*, Wien 1979, pp. 441–442.

⁴¹ E. Ludwig, *Austria – Hungary and the War*, New York 1914, pp. 35–49, 64–73.

⁴² Z. Šehić, *U smrt za cara i Domovinu. Bosanci i Hercegovci i vojnoj organizaciji Habsburške monarhije 1878–1918*, Sarajevo 2007, p. 83.

⁴³ H. Batowski, *Rozpad Austro-Węgier 1914–1918 (Sprawy narodowościowe i działania dyplomatyczne)*, Kraków 1982, p. 101.

On 25 July, Austria-Hungary announced the mobilisation of 22 divisions, starting preparations for war with Serbia⁴⁴. After Serbia announced its mobilisation, the Austro-Hungarian intelligence was forced to take all “the ways and means by which the intelligence was to contribute to the military success”. These methods were to organise insurgent activities in Macedonia, anti-war agitation among recruits and conducting sabotage operations. The campaign was led by “Macedonian gangs”, who were “entrusted with the destruction... of the railways leading through the Timoku Valley, and especially from Thessaloniki to Serbia”⁴⁵. Belgrade, after breaking its relations with Vienna, turned to Russia for help. On 30 July, Serbia also announced mobilisation, predicting that the armed attack on the part of Austria-Hungary was only a matter of time⁴⁶.

Both Wilhelm II and Franz Joseph I did not think that Russia would stand behind Belgrade⁴⁷, especially as Great Britain was leaning towards a peaceful solution to the growing crisis⁴⁸. On 28 July 1914, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. This act caused a reaction from Russia and then France, which prompted a diplomatic and military reaction from the central states. Austria-Hungary’s political and military goal was to “punish” small Serbia and eliminate it as a player in international relations in the Balkans. The situation became more complicated when Russia first entered the game, and later also its allies. Serbia’s political and military goal in the First World War was to liberate and unify the Southern Slavs. This goal was specified in the so-called “Nikšice Declaration”⁴⁹ and was pursued through four years of war – until the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes⁵⁰.

The political situation of Serbia in the summer of 1914 was extremely complicated. Belgrade could not count on help from Greece. The Kosovo and Macedonian irredentism did not expire, threatening to destabilise the south of the country, which acquired special significance in the face of the expected aggression from Austria-Hungary. Serbia, despite assurances from Sofia, expected an attack by Bulgaria, which did not accept the verdict of the Bucharest peace. Romania, although friendly to its neighbour, remained in the camp of opponents of Belgrade. In this situation, Russia and its allies attempted to pull Bulgaria on their side. Nevertheless, this diplomatic game proved to be a failure for the Entente states. Sofia was not interested in the proposals of Russia and its allies, especially since the offer made by Berlin and Vienna was more favourable. On 29 July, the Bulgarians assured Serbia of their neutrality, but Belgrade knew that it was only a game and that Sofia would enter the war on the side of this coalition, which would provide Bulgaria with greater benefits⁵¹. In

⁴⁴ M. Ronge, *Dwanaście lat...*, p. 61; *Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg 1914–1918, Verlag der Militärwissenschaftlichen Mitteilungen*, E. von Glaise-Horstenau (ed.), Band I, Wien 1930–1939, p. 32; *The Times History of the War*, London 1916, vol. 7, April 25, p. 359.

⁴⁵ M. Ronge, *Dwanaście lat...*, p. 61.

⁴⁶ K. Dorst, W. Wünsche, *Der ersten Weltkrieg Erscheinung Und Wesen*, Berlin 1989, pp. 43–46.

⁴⁷ M. Ronge, *Dwanaście lat...*, p. 60.

⁴⁸ Minister Grey proposed an extension of the deadline for answering the ultimatum, but the proposals were rejected. Another British initiative (from 27 July) to organise a conference of four powers, J. Dąbrowski, *Wielka Wojna...*, vol. 1, pp. 66–68.

⁴⁹ Đorđe Đ. Stanković, *Ratni ciljevi Srbije 1914 godine – subjektivni činioci*, “Vojnoistorijski Glasnik” 1984, current year 3, p. 94.

⁵⁰ D. Janković, *Srbija i jugoslovensko pitanje 1914–1915*, Beograd 1973, pp. 473–478.

⁵¹ H. Batowski, *Państwa bałkańskie 1800–1923...*, pp. 236, 243. The game of Paris and London, after the disclosure of the scale of territorial concessions to Bulgaria, irritated the political elite of Serbia, led by Nikola Pašić, who refused to allow Serbia to give up much of Macedonia. The Serbs knew that no concessions to Bul-

fact, despite the declared neutrality, Sofia provided numerous services to the central states. It allowed for the transport of arms and ammunition for the Ottoman Empire and was a transit country for German officers and soldiers going to Istanbul⁵². Hatred towards “rogue allies,” as the Greeks and Serbs were commonly referred to in Bulgaria, placed Sofia among the natural allies of the central states⁵³. After the defeat of the Entente in the Dardanelles, the Bulgarian government made the final decision to join the war on the side of the Central powers. According to the negotiated agreement, Sofia was to receive the areas of Macedonia, within the limits set by the 1912 Treaty of the Alliance, and in addition, lands south of the Danube and east of Moravia up to the Šar Planina range, to the border set out in the Treaty of San Stefano⁵⁴. Additionally, if Bucharest entered the war on the side of the Entente, the Bulgarians would also receive Dobruja. The Bulgarians were not allowed to take any military action against Greece, unless the latter opted for the Entente. The Bulgarians also signed an alliance agreement with Turkey⁵⁵.

It must be stated that the Germans took full advantage of the Serbian-Bulgarian and Greek-Bulgarian antagonisms, achieving political and military success, crucial for the further course of the war. They managed to join a third ally, Bulgaria, to the central states, at the same time obtaining a guarantee that Romania and Greece will remain neutral.

Despite the successes achieved by Serbia in the summer and autumn campaigns in 1914 and the heavy losses inflicted on Austria-Hungary, a year later it was unable to resist the combined forces of the Central powers. The Serbian troops left behind by the Entente resisted with courage for a few months. Yet, eventually, they had to succumb to the predominance of enemies, and the remnants of the Serbian army and the population, after a murderous march, attacked by Bulgarian troops and Albanian gangs, reached the Adriatic Coast and were then transferred to Corfu, France and Africa.

Greece, under the reign of King Constantine, finally evaded its duty of alliance and remained neutral until 1917. The government of Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos, aiming to bring Greece into the war on the side of the Entente in 1915, asked France and England to issue a contingent of 150,000 troops against Bulgaria. In response, London and Paris allocated a part of their forces and sent the Expeditionary Force to Thessaloniki, which became the nucleus of the Eastern Army, creating the so-called Thessaloniki/Macedonian (Balkan) front. Nonetheless, this was the last chord of the pro-alliance policy on Venizelos’s part, as the power in Greece was taken over by court supporters oriented towards neutrality and pro-German politics. It was the coup d’état organised in 1917 by Venizelos’

garia would lead to a change in its position. They also proposed a preventive strike on Bulgaria in order to eliminate it from action before it reaches full readiness for war. Nevertheless, Serbia’s proposals were rejected due to the position of British diplomacy, M. Grahovac, *Bugarske snage u trajnoj agresiji protiv Srbije 1915*, “Vojnoistorijski Glasnik” 1985, current year 2, p. 146; P. Opačić, A. Drašković, B. Ratković, *U bitkama kod Beograda 1915, Mojkovca, Kajmakčalana i Dobrog Polja*, Knjiga Sedma, Beograd 1998, pp. 59–63.

⁵² J. Pajewski, “Mitteleuropa”. *Studia z dziejów imperializmu niemieckiego w dobie pierwszej wojny światowej*, Poznań 1959, p. 174; H. von Kuhl, *Der Weltkrieg 1914–1918. Dem deutsche Volke dergestellt*, vol. I, Berlin 1929, pp. 156–157.

⁵³ H. Batowski, *Państwa bałkańskie 1800–1923...*, p. 236.

⁵⁴ Ž. Avramovski, *Ratni ciljevi Bugarske i centralne sile...*, p. 150–151.

⁵⁵ J. Rubacha, A. Malinowski, A. Giza, *Historia Bułgarii 1870–1915*, vol. 1, Warszawa 2009, pp. 139–140, 148, 152.

followers, supported by the Entente's troops, that led to a change in the position of Athens, which entered the war with the Central powers.

Year 1918 and the Inter-War Period

On the ruins of the old powers new states were created and new players entered the game. Italy, with its aspirations, reached for the Habsburg monarchy's legacy, provoking a number of conflicts among the members of the Entente. They were aiming to gain a dominant position in the Balkans⁵⁶. The seizure of strategic points on the Adriatic Coast (Istria, Dalmatian towns and islands, as well as the coast of Albania)⁵⁷ by the Italian army at the end of 1918 gave Rome the basis – at least in its initial phase, i.e. in the years 1918–1920 – for further expansion into the Peninsula, at the same time becoming a seedbed of an escalating conflict not only with Serbia and Greece, but also with France. Italian politicians hoped that for their contribution to the defeat of the central states, Italy would gain significant territorial benefits in the Adriatic Sea Basin and in the division of German colonies in Africa. Nevertheless, the development of events in the final phase of military operations in the Balkans caused the Italians to face a serious opponent, which consolidating state of the Southern Slavs became for Rome, whose goal was to unite all the lands inhabited by Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Furthermore, they could not expect the Greeks, who were supported by Great Britain, to resign from their claims against Epirus. In addition, the United States also stood in the way of the Italian plans, due to Wilson's fourteen points and the principle of self-determination, which defined the fundamental position of the country in determining the post-war order, including in the Balkans⁵⁸. The Italian aspirations were opposed primarily by Serbs and Croatian and Slovenian nation leaders, who aimed to implement the 19th century idea of uniting Slavic peoples in one common state⁵⁹. On 29 October 1918, the Parliament (Sabor) of Croatia and Slavonia voted unanimously to break the legal ties with Hungary and Austria and to establish an independent state⁶⁰. On 1 December 1918, at a solemn meeting, a delegation of the Zagreb National Council informed the heir to the throne, Prince Alexander, about the decision to unite⁶¹. Following this act, he proclaimed the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Kraljevina Srba Hrvata and Slovenaca; hereinafter: Kingdom of SHS)⁶².

⁵⁶ H. Batowski H., *Między dwiema wojnami 1919–1939. Zarys historii dyplomatycznej*, Kraków 2001, p. 23.

⁵⁷ These aggressive actions triggered a strong reaction from the Kingdom of Serbia. The protests in London and Paris were unsuccessful. Italian diplomacy effectively "torpedoed" the efforts of Serbs and Croats, and its troops eventually occupied the large areas of northern Albania, some islands of the Adriatic coast, Zadar, Pula (including the Istria Peninsula), M. Montanarri, *Le truppe italiane in Albania (anni 1914–20 e 1939)*, Roma 1978, pp. 164–172, 185–200; W. Walkiewicz, *Zmagania o Triest – ostatni front u zmierzchu wojny powszechnej*, in: *I wojna światowa na Balkanach. Działania militarne i polityczne w latach 1914–1918. Studia i materiały*, A. Krzak (ed.), Szczecin 2014, p. 331.

⁵⁸ J. Goricar, *The Yugoslav-Italian Question*, New York 1919, pp. 5–8.

⁵⁹ M.A. Mihojlević, *The Yugoslav Question with special regard to the Coasts of the Adriatic*, Zagreb 1919, pp. 13–15.

⁶⁰ H. Batowski, *Rozpad Austro-Węgier 1914–1918...*, p. 255.

⁶¹ M. Ekmečić, *Stvaranje Jugoslavije 1790–1918*, vol. 2, Beograd 1989, pp. 820–821.

⁶² W. Felczak, T. Wasilewski, *Historia Jugosławii*, Wrocław 1985, p. 430.

Yet, this act was not enthusiastically received by the population and some Croatian, Slovenian and Montenegrin politicians. Many right-wing and national politicians were opposed to associating with Serbia, fearing that Serbian radical circles would seek to centralise the state. Some of the politicians and the population supported the establishment of the republic. In Montenegro, on the other hand, a large opposition was created calling for the break of ties with Serbs and the return to the throne of Nicholas I⁶³. Nevertheless, a large part of the Macedonians were either in favour of the annexation of the lands they inhabited to Bulgaria or the creation of a sovereign Macedonian state⁶⁴. These positions generated conflicts, especially as the aspirations of the Montenegrin, Macedonian, Croatian and Slovenian separatists found a protector, in particular, in Rome.

The emergence of the Southern Slavs did not relieve the tense situation but it generated new antagonisms. The Italians redoubled their efforts to achieve their goals and expand their influence on the Balkan Peninsula. It seemed that the conflict between the Kingdom of Italy and the Kingdom of SHS would turn into an armed clash. The tense situation was further escalated, among others, by the statements and “d’Annunzio” rally in Fiume, the outbreak of the December uprising in Montenegro and the attempt to restore King Nicholas to the throne, and the initiation of the rebellion by the Albanian clans on the border, Kosovo and Metohija, as well as the increasing number of sabotage activities organised by the Macedonian separatists.

The Italian-Yugoslav conflict lasted for several months, escalating towards a military settlement. Only the decisive intervention of the great powers, as well as the change of government in Italy, led to the initiation of talks and the final signing of the agreement between Italy and the Kingdom of SHS. The Italians captured Istria, Trieste, Trento and some of the Dalmatian islands, but the Allies refused to give them Rijeka. Finally, the Italian-Yugoslav conflict came to an end with the signing of the Rapallo Treaty in 1920, which did not end the disputes, but only led to a temporary freeze of the outbreak of conflicts⁶⁵. In accordance with the agreement, the Italians left Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Montenegro⁶⁶. They also had to withdraw from Albania due to the growing resistance of irregular Albanian troops⁶⁷. The evacuation of Italian forces from Albania was primarily influenced by the attitude of the soldiers who refused to participate in the fighting with the insurgents and demanded that they return to the country⁶⁸. Under such conditions, the Italian government and the command of the Italian army had no choice but to leave the “land of the eagles”.

The end of the Great War brought not only the elimination of the three powers: the German Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Romanov Empire, but the geopolitical architecture of Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans also changed. The dualistic monarchy was dissolved, resulting in the creation of two independent states – Austria and Hungary. The Ottoman Porte ceased to exist, and the Turkish Republic was born on its ruins, thanks to Kemal

⁶³ In 1916, after the offensive of the troops of the Central powers, Montenegro was taken over by the Austro-Hungarian army, and King Nicholas I left the country and went to exile.

⁶⁴ M. Ekmečić, *Stvaranje Jugoslavije...*, vol. 2, pp. 800–801.

⁶⁵ D.R. Živojinović, *Amerikanci na Jadranu 1918–1919 godine*, “Vojnoistorijski Glasnik” 1970, current year 3, p. 151; W. Walkiewicz, *Jugosławia. Był wspólny i rozpad*, Warszawa 2000, p. 45.

⁶⁶ D.R. Živojinović, *Amerikanci na Jadranu...*, p. 151.

⁶⁷ I. Stawowy-Kawka, *Albańczycy w Macedonii 1944–2001*, Kraków 2014, p. 39.

⁶⁸ H. Batowski, *Związki albańsko-włoskie*, “Polityka Narodów” 1934, vol. 1–2, p. 29.

Atatürk. Bulgaria had to accept the defeat and, like Austria and Hungary, accept the terms of the Entente. This meant that parts of the Land with Maribor, a patch of Carinthia and southern Styria were taken over by the SHS Kingdom, which was established on 10 September 1919 in the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye⁶⁹. The fate of Southern Carinthia was to be decided by a plebiscite. It was carried out in October 1920 and ended with the defeat of the Kingdom of SHS. The attempt by the Slovenians to change the verdict of the plebiscite Commission by force, with the tacit support of Belgrade, did not bring a positive result⁷⁰.

In turn, the Yugoslav-Hungarian antagonism took on a completely different character, which was mainly related to the events that took place in that country. In March 1919, there was the Communist Revolution, which resulted in the establishment of the Hungarian Soviet Republic (hereinafter: HSR). At the same time, the Hungarian communists announced further expansion, which threatened the neighbouring countries. The Red Hungary's efforts were stopped by the contraction of neighbouring countries, which did not allow for further "export of the revolution".

The communist rebellion in Hungary threatened all of Central and South-Eastern Europe, and the prospective success of the Hungarian Communists, supported by Bolshevik Russia, could have led to a change in international relations. Belgrade was aware that both the Horthy's government and the Communists would not accept the possible loss of Bačka, Baranja and Međimurje, therefore, the Yugoslav government decided to secure its borders without engaging in military intervention against the HSR⁷¹. It was only the influence of the great powers worried about the situation in Hungary that forced the Kingdom of SHS to take military action. Nevertheless, the military action was limited and consisted in sending the units of the Danube river flotilla to Budapest and entering of a division battle group to southern Hungary⁷². Finally, the communist rebellion in Hungary was suppressed as a result of the operations of French and Romanian troops, which occupied Budapest at the beginning of August⁷³. Yet, Hungary did not resign from attempts to destabilise the internal situation in the SHS Kingdom by providing support to nationalist circles from Croatia and Macedonia, conducting intensive intelligence activities in the northern regions of the Yugoslav state and provoking border incidents⁷⁴.

Hungarian revisionism led to intensified talks and the establishment and consolidation of collaboration between Romania, the Kingdom of SHS and Czechoslovakia, which saw Hungary's actions as a threat to the order after the First World War. Negotiations initiated by Czechoslovakia eventually led to the formation of an anti-Hungarian alliance and the creation of a "Small Entente"⁷⁵.

⁶⁹ W. Felczak, T. Wasilewski, *Historia...*, p. 432.

⁷⁰ M. Bjelajac, *Vojaska Kraljevine Srba Hrvata i Slovenaca 1918–1921*, Beograd 1988, pp. 147–148.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 150–156.

⁷² V. Vinaver, *Jugoslavija i Mađarska 1918–1933*, Beograd 1971, pp. 47–56.

⁷³ L. Buczma, *Z genezy Malej Ententy*, "Studia z Dziejów ZSRR i Europy Środkowej" 1970, vol. VI, p. 130.

⁷⁴ *Communication du Gouvernement Yougoslave. Au Conseil de la Société des Nations relative aux responsabilités encourues par les autorités hongroises dans l'action terroriste dirigée contre la Yougoslavie*, Genève Novembre 1934, AJ, Ministarstvo Unutrašnjih Poslova KJ (hereinafter referred to as: MUP KJ), Odeljenje za Državnu Zaštitu (hereinafter referred to as: ODZ), br. f. 14, fasc. 27.

⁷⁵ This name appeared for the first time in an ironic article printed in a Hungarian newspaper, "Pesti Hirlap", which suggested: "that Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Romania want to create an Entente, even a small one", L. Buczma, *Z genezy Malej...*, p. 132.

Also Bulgaria, after the stabilisation of the internal situation, connected with the speeches of the revolutionary army units, did not intend to give up the fight for its future. Even before the Versailles conference began, Sofia undertook negotiations with the SHS Kingdom concerning the borders. Yet, Belgrade rejected the Bulgarian proposals. Meanwhile, Bulgaria received support for its plans from Italy. Rome, while playing a diplomatic game with the Kingdom of SHS, decided to support the Bulgarians, in accordance with the previously adopted tactics of antagonising the newly created State of Southern Slavs with its neighbours⁷⁶. The main objective of the Italian policy was to prevent the internal situation of the SHS Kingdom from being stabilised and to weaken the Yugoslav state on the international stage. The Bulgarians, supported by Italy, taking advantage of the tense situation in Macedonia, launched a propaganda offensive against the Kingdom of SHS⁷⁷, whose aim was to internationalise the Macedonian case. They aimed, among others, to conduct a plebiscite in which the population of this region would opt for Bulgaria. However, at the decisive moment of the clash, Sofia remained alone with its proposals, and its fate finally settled in Neuilly. As a result of the peace treaty ending the war, the Bulgarians lost the Cariboda region, the Strumica region and the border strips in the Timok river valley to the benefit of Belgrade, while to the benefit of Greece – Thrace and the strip of coastline with access to the Aegean Sea⁷⁸. The treaty also imposed Bulgaria with the need to reduce its armed forces⁷⁹. They were also not allowed to possess air forces, armoured weapons or offensive naval forces⁸⁰.

The situation in Greece after the end of the war was extremely favourable. Supported by Great Britain, it obtained virtually everything it demanded. Thus, Greek politicians faced the possibility of implementing the “Megali Idei”, which was to enable the construction of a state within the borders and expansion from the ancient period. In 1919, the only obstacle for Athens was: the anarchic Ottoman Empire and the Kingdom of Italy. The War initiated by Greece in 1919 against the Ottoman Porte (or rather Kemalists who formed separate state structures and opposed the dictatorship of the Entente states) led to the expulsion of the Greeks from Asia Minor. The Ottoman Empire collapsed and the Republic of Turkey was established in its place. The peace between Greece and Turkey was signed in Lausanne on 24 July 1923. It completely revised the provisions of the Treaty of Sèvres. In addition to population exchange, it maintained the unity and independence of the Turkish state, demilitarised the area around the Bosphorus, Dardanelles and Marmara Sea, and internationalised

⁷⁶ According to the data of the Serbian General Staff, the Italians provided significant financial and military assistance to the Bulgarian war criminal, General Protogerov, who had links with the Macedonian VMRO. He organised the groups of Bulgarian komitadi, which were then transferred to Macedonia and Albania to conduct irregular operations against Serbian troops, M. Bjelajac, *Vojska Kraljevine Srba Hrvata i Slovenaca...*, p. 171.

⁷⁷ The Bulgarians, despite the failure of their diversionary and political activities, did not cease their destructive actions against the Yugoslav authorities in Macedonia, *Information Paper of 1 June 1920, Military Historical Bureau* (hereinafter: WBH), Central Military Archives (hereinafter: CAW), Panel Unit II of the General Staff of the Polish Army 1921–1939 (hereinafter: Unit II SG), Ref. (hereinafter: Ref.) I.303.4.7173, p. 4.

⁷⁸ *Information Paper of 2 December 1919*, WBH, CAW, Unit II SG, Ref. I.303.4.7178, p. 1. *Information Paper of 15 December 1919*, WBH, CAW, Unit II SG, Ref. I.303.4.7178, p. 9.

⁷⁹ The Treaty of Neuilly allowed for the possession of a total of 33,000 soldiers, gendarmes and border guards, A. Ganchev, *Bulgarian army after the world war*, “Bellona”, April 1931, vol. XXXVII, p. 300.

⁸⁰ In addition, the number of professional officers and non-commissioned officers, as well as the quantity of equipment and ammunition stocks was reduced, *ibidem*, pp. 300–301.

access to the so-called Turkish straits⁸¹. It also laid the foundations for normalising the Greek-Turkish relations, partially suppressing the antagonism between Athens and Ankara.

In the late spring and summer of 1923, the situation on the Greek-Albanian border became more acute. In view of the escalating incidents resulting from the actions of Albanian robbery bands, Greece took vigorous steps to stop the activities of criminal groups. Military troops were sent to the border area to bring peace⁸². The Greek actions were met with a strong reaction from Rome. The situation worsened after the murder of the head of the Albanian-Greek border demarcation commission, General Enrico Tellini (and two Italian members of the mission) by unknown perpetrators. Rome accused the Greeks of the murder, but they, in turn, blamed the Albanian bandits. In response, Italy issued an ultimatum that could not be accepted by the Greek government, and Italy launched military action by occupying the island of Corfu⁸³. The crisis lasted until the middle of September, when, after the intervention of the League of Nations and the fulfilment of the Italian ultimatum by Athens, the Italians withdrew their troops⁸⁴.

Romania, like the State of Southern Slavs⁸⁵, proved to be the beneficiary of the First World War because its aspirations were practically fully fulfilled⁸⁶. Apart from the possessions of the former Habsburg monarchy⁸⁷, Bucharest gained also Bessarabia⁸⁸. Thus, the dream of creating another “great state”⁸⁹ in the Balkans came true.

⁸¹ T. Wituch, *Tureckie przemiany. Dzieje Turcji 1878–1923*, Warszawa 1980, p. 268; M. Tanty, *Bosfor i Dardanele...*, p. 342; E.J. Erickson, *The Turkish War of Independence. A Military History, 1919–1923*, Santa Barbara Denver 2021, pp. 329–333; D. Kołodziejczyk, *Turcja*, Warszawa 2000, p. 113.

⁸² *The Struggle for Northern Epirus*, Athens 2000, pp. 374–375.

⁸³ *Ibidem*, pp. 376–377; J.W. Dyskant, *Konflikty i zbrojenia morskie 1918–1939*, Gdańsk 1983, pp. 149–151.

⁸⁴ D. Kokkinos, *Oi dyo pole moi*, Athens 1945, pp. 156–157.

⁸⁵ The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and from 3 October 1929, the name was changed by a royal decree to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

⁸⁶ M. Willaume, *Rumunia*, Warszawa 2004, p. 93.

⁸⁷ These lands were annexed by the peace treaties of Saint-Germain-en-Laye (with Austria, 10 September 1919), Neuilly (with Bulgaria, 27 November 1919) and Trianon (with Hungary, 4 June 1920), S. Wędkiewicz, *Rumunia po wojnie*, Warszawa 1923, pp. 4–5; M. Willaume, *Rumunia...*, pp. 93–95; J. Dąbrowski, *Wielka Wojna...*, vol. 2, pp. 1000–1002, 1004.

⁸⁸ In the beginning, that is in 1914, Romania declared neutrality, but remained a desirable ally for both the Central powers and the Entente. Finally, the efforts of the French diplomat and politician, Aristid Briand, in 1916 led Bucharest to take the side of the Great Britain, France and their allies, and to take a stand against the central states. In August 1916, Romania signed a political-military treaty with France, Great Britain, Italy and Russia, hoping to join the Transylvania and Bukovina to the Kingdom. However, the campaign against the Austria-Hungarian army, despite its initial successes, ended in disaster. In December 1916, the Germans occupied Bucharest and the king and government took refuge in Jassy. In 1917, the Romanians carried out a successful counter-offensive, but its success was not exploited, because Russia “fell out” of the war and its troops left the Romanian front after the February Revolution and the Bolshevik coup. On 7 May 1918, Romania was forced to sign a separatist peace with Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey and Bulgaria. At the end of 1917, the Moldovan People’s Republic was established in Bessarabia, which then changed its name to the Moldovan Democratic Republic. Romanian national activists took action to attach the Bessarabian lands to the Kingdom. In the spring of 1918, the members of the pro-Romanian Council of the Country passed a resolution to annex Bessarabia to Romania and on 12 April in Jassy they provided King Ferdinand with an act of will to include Bessarabia to the Kingdom. The ruler of Romania confirmed by decree the act of annexation of the Bessarabia province to the Romanian state, J. Demel, *Historia Rumunii*, Wrocław 1986, p. 356; M. Willaume, *Besarabia – jej położenie u końca I wojny światowej w świetle badań oraz ówczesnej publicystyki*, “Res Historica” 2011, vol. 31, p. 65.

⁸⁹ It is about “Great Romania” (Romania Măre), J. Demel, *Historia Rumunii...*, p. 359.

As it was emphasised, the First World War changed drastically the geopolitical architecture and international relations in the Balkans. Yet, it did not solve any of the problems that the Balkan states were facing before it began. Despite the removal of the most important players, i.e. the Second Reich, Russia and Austria-Hungary, the conflicts, although frozen, continued to influence the history of the Balkan states. Italy took its place after the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, whose ambitions to control the Peninsula and the Mediterranean Sea were to lead to conflicts with Greece and Yugoslavia.

As in all of Europe, in the Balkans the victors sought to maintain the post-Versailles order at all costs. However, it was in conflict with the revisionism of the defeated and the claims of the disillusioned ones who did not accept the Treaty of Versailles or the subsequent agreements regulating the geopolitical architecture in the Balkans after the Great War.

In the inter-war period, the Balkans on the geopolitical map of the Old Continent became a relatively remote area and rather had no influence on the history of Europe. Neither the initiatives related to the appointment of the Small Entente nor the so-called Balkan Entente changed that situation⁹⁰. Nor did the antagonisms with the new player on the Balkan chessboard, which Italy became, had any greater significance for international relations. They brought nothing new to the security architecture: the alliance of France with Romania of 1926 and France with Yugoslavia, concluded a year later⁹¹. Similarly, the conferences in Athens, Istanbul, Bucharest and Thessaloniki did not have much influence on the formation of the policy of the great powers and on the diplomatic games, the vector of which shifted to the axis of Paris – Berlin – Warsaw – Moscow. Another problem was the unexpired antagonism and internal conflict in the various Balkan states, which were used by the big players to achieve their particular goals, especially in the area of strengthening their influence.

Undoubtedly, for more than twenty years of the post-Versailles peace (or rather the truce), relations evolved, taking on a new dimension: Serbian-Croatian, Serbian-Bulgarian (the dispute over Macedonia and the areas annexed after 1919), Serbian-Albanian (Albania's aspirations to the areas of the Yugoslav state – Kosovo, part of the lands of Montenegro), Serbian/Yugoslavian-Italian, as well as Greek-Bulgarian animosities (in relation to the lands, which Bulgaria lost as a result of the First World War), Bulgarian-Romanian (Dobruja), Yugoslavian-Romanian (for the Banat border line), Greek-Yugoslavian (for access to the port of Thessaloniki), Yugoslavian-Italian (for Yugoslavia's claims to Istria, Trieste and Gorizia and Italian claims to Zadar, Rijeka, Dalmatian coast and islands), Greek-Italian (the Ionian Sea dispute and the conflict with Albania over the southern part of the state) and the Greek-Turkish conflict⁹². However, there was no Bosnian or Kosovo issue at the time.

It should be underlined that in the inter-war period, the Balkans as a region lost its importance. Italy, taking advantage of the complicated situation in the Balkans and the weakness of the Kingdom of SHS/Yugoslavia, pursued a more or less hostile policy against

⁹⁰ On 9 February 1934 in Athens, so called Balkan Entente was proclaimed, bringing together Greece, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the Kingdom of Romania and Turkey, E. Znamierowska-Rakk, *Balkany w układach wersalskim i jaltańsko-poczdamskim*, "Dzieje Najnowsze" 1996, year XXXVIII, vol. 2, p. 40.

⁹¹ Ž. Avramovski, *Balkanske Zemle i Velike sile 1935–1937. Od italijanske agresije na Etiopiju do jugoslavensko-italijanskog pakta*, Beograd 1969, p. 10.

⁹² A. Garlicka, *Balkany a Europa w XIX i XX wieku*, in: *Dziesięć wieków Europy. Studia z dziejów kontynentu*, J. Życzyński (ed.), Warszawa 1983, p. 400; M. Bjelajac, *Diplomatija i vojska. Srbija i Jugoslavija 1901–1999*, Beograd 2010, pp. 127–130, 136–141, 151–158 et passim.

Belgrade and Athens. They actively supported the internal irredenta in the territory of Yugoslavia, using nationalist organisations, such as: Ustaša (Insurgent) of Ante Pavelić and VMRO – an organisation of Macedonian revolutionaries fighting for the independence of Macedonia⁹³. They supported the revisionism of Bulgaria and Hungary⁹⁴ in their anti-Yugoslav policies.

It should also be remembered that the issue of Serbian-Croatian antagonism had a fairly long history and resulted mainly from the unfulfilled expectations of politicians and the Croatian people related to the establishment of an independent Croatian state or a loose connection with the Kingdom of SHS/Yugoslavia. The Croatian-Serbian antagonism created numerous revolts on the part of the Croatian population. In 1939, the scale of the conflict threatened the security of the state. It led to concessions from the Yugoslav authorities, reorganisation of the state administration, granting autonomy to Croatia and the return of the Croatian leader dr Vlado Maček to the government⁹⁵. However, these decisions were delayed and the only effect of the agreements was to control the atmosphere and *de facto* freeze the Croatian-Serbian antagonism.

A particular role in Rome's political games was played by Albania, which after a short republican period became a monarchy again owing to the coup (organised and funded by the SHS Kingdom) of clan leader Ahmed beg Zogu, later King of Albania. Albania's mesalliance with Yugoslavia was short, as the protector from Belgrade was soon replaced by a wealthier and stronger Italy. Within a dozen or so years, Albania became a non-independent entity, a puppet and a tool in the hands of Rome, used in games against both Yugoslavia and Greece.

Another internal problem for the Balkan governments was the active operation of the Communists, members of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, the Communist Party of Greece and the Communist Party of Bulgaria, and above all the activists of the Communist International (Comintern)⁹⁶. The Communists, controlled by the Comintern and *de facto* political authorities of the Soviet Union, carried out active destructive, subversive, propaganda, intelligence and sabotage-diversion operations paid for by Moscow⁹⁷.

⁹³ Sponsored by external entities, it resulted, inter alia, in spectacular terrorist attacks and revolts (e.g. the assassination of King Alexander I and Foreign Minister Louis Barthou in Marseille in 1934 and others), *Communication du Gouvernement Yougoslave. Au Conseil de la Société des Nations relative aux responsabilités encourues par les autorités hongroises dans l'action terroriste dirigée contre la Yougoslavie*, Genève Novembre 1934, AJ, Ministarstvo unutrašnjih Poslova KJ (hereinafter referred to as: MUP KJ), Odeljenje za Državnu Zaštitu (hereinafter referred to as: ODZ), br. f. 14, fasc. 27.

⁹⁴ Ž. Avramovski, *Balkanske Zemle i Velike sile 1935–1937...*, pp. 9–10.

⁹⁵ *A note on the situation in Yugoslavia*, the Archives of the Polish Institute and the Museum named after Władysław Sikorski in London (hereinafter: AIPMS), Civil Government documents, 1919–1991 (hereinafter: DCUR), Panel Ministry of Internal Affairs Department of Continental Works. General (hereinafter: MSW PR), Ref. A9.VI.22/1, p. 3, 5; W. Felczak, T. Wasilewski, *Historia...*, pp. 467–468.

⁹⁶ *Opšta situacija bolševičkog režima kako ju je predstavio Komitet Izvršni III Kongresa III Internacionale*, AJ, MUP KJ, Antidržavna Delatnost (hereinafter referred to as: AD), F. 14, br. f. 23, p. 320; *Izveštaj Komanda Mesta Sambor, 12.III.1923 g.*, AJ, MUP KJ, Odeljenje za Banat, Backu i Baranju (hereinafter referred to as: OBBB), Komunistička Delatnost (hereinafter referred to as: KD), br. f. 14, br. fasc. 133, p. 72; *Izveštaj Štaba Vel. Kneza Nikolaja Nikolajevicia odnosno komunističkog pokreta na Balkanu u toku 1925 godine*, AJ, MUP KJ, AD, F. 14, br. f. 24, p. 116.

⁹⁷ For example, the bombing of the “Sveta Nedela” Orthodox church in 1925, the outbreak of the uprising in Bulgaria in 1923, I. Ristić, *Boljševička akcija na Balkanu (do sredine dvadesetih godina XX veka)*, “Arhiv. Časopis Arhiva Jugoslavije” 2011, current year 1–2, pp. 69–75; 79; K. Nikolić, *Teroristička delatnost Komunističke*

In the thirties of the twentieth century, in the Balkans, alongside the weakening France and the British people not interested in the Peninsula, a new player appeared, i.e. the Third Reich, which in a relatively short time gained a significant position in the international and internal relations in the Balkans. German expansion was supported by the weakening position of France and the lack of assertiveness in British politics. Berlin, through its expansionist policies, especially the economic ones, secured favour among the right-wing (fascist) political elites of the Balkan states. Authoritarian governments looked with admiration at the growing importance of Germany being rebuilt by the Nazis. The economy of the Third Reich was developing, the internal situation was stabilised, the political opponents neutralised, and on the international stage Germany dictated its conditions, which the great powers assumed at the price of preserving the *status quo*. After the annexation of Austria and the absorption of the Czech Republic, and the alliance with Hungary and Bulgaria, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and Greece found themselves in a complicated geopolitical situation (especially after Italy occupied Albania in April 1939)⁹⁸. An uncertain alliance with France, trying to build a regional security system, had to face the increasingly aggressive expansion of Italy and the Third Reich. In April 1939, Italy, after a brief war campaign, occupied Albania⁹⁹. The great powers, apart from the occasional protests, did nothing to stop Rome¹⁰⁰. Furthermore, they put pressure on Yugoslavia and Greece in order not to take any steps that could lead to a military conflict. This extremely unfavourable geopolitical system deteriorated further after Poland's defeat in September.

The further escalation of the situation in the Balkans in the second half of 1939 forced a diplomatic and military response from France and later London. The aim of these actions was to try to consolidate allies in the Balkans. However, negotiations on the formation of a military pact that would be able to lead to a strike from the Balkans against the Third Reich and Italy did not bring in the expected results¹⁰¹. There were also unsuccessful attempts to assemble a broad alliance of the Balkan Entente states, which were an initiative

Partije Jugoslavije u Kraljevini SHS (1921–1930), "Istorijski Glasnik" 1993, Sv. 1–2, p. 92–95; B. Gligorijević, *Komintern, jugoslovensko i srpsko pitanje*, Beograd 1992, p. 242; *The Vienna Centre of The Communist International, CX/1178, dated: 17/8/28*, The National Archives Kew (hereinafter referred to as: NAK), Russian Intelligence Organisations in The Balkan States (hereinafter referred to as: RIOB), Ref. KV 3/228; *Report of The Military Section of The "AMI" for The period January to March 1927. CX/1178, dated: 12.10.28*, NAK, RIOB, Ref. KV 3/228; *Communism in the Balkans, Copy of the Report dated: 20.9.28*, NAK, RIOB, Ref. KV 3/228; *Communism in the Balkans: Importance of Constantinople as a Centre. Central Department Foreign Office. CX/1178, dated: 01/06/2027*, NAK, RIOB, Ref. KV 3/228.

⁹⁸ A. Garlicka, *Wielka Brytania i Balkany 1935–1939*, Warszawa 2001, pp. 296–297.

⁹⁹ *An Abridged History of The Greek-Italian and Greek-German War 1940–1941*, Athens 1997, pp. 10–11; B.J. Fischer, *Albania at War 1939–1945*, London 1998, pp. 21–25; I. Stawowy-Kawka, *Albańczycy w Macedonii...*, p. 42.

¹⁰⁰ *Sir A. Rayan to Viscount Halifax, April 20, 1939*, NAK, Cabinet Office (hereinafter referred to as: CAB), Occupation of Albania by Italy, Ref. 21/1048; *Prime Minister's Statement in the House of Commons, April, 13 1939*, NAK, CAB, Occupation of Albania by Italy, Ref. 21/1048; *Circular: To the Governments of Canada, Commonwealth of Australia, New Zealand Union of South Africa and Eire*, 8th April 1939, NAK, CAB, Occupation of Albania by Italy, Ref. 21/1048; *Circular: To the Governments of Canada, Commonwealth of Australia, New Zealand Union of South Africa and Eire*, 8th April 1939, Circular B, No. 142, NAK, CAB, Occupation of Albania by Italy, Ref. 21/1048; *Viscount Halifax to Sir A. Rayan (Durazzo), April, 8 1939*, NAK, CAB, Occupation of Albania by Italy, Ref. 21/1048.

¹⁰¹ Talks concerning, among other things, the plan of launching a joint military action, that is, the creation of a second front in the Balkans, failed, H. Batowski, *Z polityki międzynarodowej XX wieku. Wybór studiów z lat 1930–1970*, Kraków 1979, pp. 332–340; J. Hoptner, *Jugosławia u krizi 1934–1941*, Rijeka 1973, pp. 181–184.

of London. The contraction of German and Italian diplomacy (the Italians again played the Croatian card, supporting the Pavelić separatists) proved so effective that Turkey, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria were not willing to accept British proposals¹⁰². The situation did not change after the Third Reich's aggression against Poland. On 5 September 1939, Yugoslavia declared its neutrality. Other Balkan states and Italy did the same¹⁰³.

However, the Italians did not intend to give up the control of the Peninsula. The decision to resolve the Greek Yugoslav question by force was made after France was eliminated from the war. Mussolini concluded that Britain would not take action, and that the Italian armed forces had sufficient capacity to cope with both Balkan states, which for two decades had stood in the way of the Italian plans to rule the Balkans. Berlin opposed the aggression against Yugoslavia, and the Italian army attacked Greece. Mussolini intended to resolve the long-standing conflict with Athens through a swift campaign. The Italians began the attack in October 1940. Their calculations proved to be in vain, as the Greeks put up fierce resistance and, at the cost of considerable effort, not only destroyed Duce's plans, but went on to counter-attack, inflicting considerable losses on the Italian army and occupying a part of the territory of Albania¹⁰⁴.

Italy's seizure of Albania and its aggression against Greece in 1940 were not the only acts of violence changing the geopolitical balance of the Balkan Peninsula. In June 1940, the Soviet Union issued an ultimatum to Romania to immediately transfer Bessarabia and northern Bukovina under threat of military intervention¹⁰⁵. Romania initially opposed Moscow's demands, but diplomatic pressure from Rome and Berlin led to the transfer of these provinces to the USSR. On 28 June, Soviet troops entered Bessarabia and Bukovina and by 30 June, the Red Army troops reached the Prut River line, establishing a new Romanian-Soviet border. Taking advantage of Romania's disastrous situation, Hungary and Bulgaria also made territorial claims against Bucharest, threatening to take military action. Fearing the loss of Romanian oil supplies, Berlin again pressured the Romanian government to approve the demands of its neighbours. Romania was forced to negotiate with the delegations of Hungary and Bulgaria¹⁰⁶. As a result of the Second Vienna Arbitration signed on 30 August 1940, Bucharest lost northern Transylvania with a part of Marmorosch and Krishan to the benefit of Hungary, while under the Craiova Treaty it lost southern Dobruja¹⁰⁷.

Diplomatic Games of the Great Powers in the Balkans in the Years 1941–1945

Due to the successful development of the military-political situation for Germany, Berlin increased diplomatic pressure on Yugoslavia, aiming to bind the Kingdom with the

¹⁰² A. Garlicka, *Wielka Brytania i Balkany...*, pp. 298–299.

¹⁰³ W. Murray, Allan R. Millet, *A War to Be Won. Fighting the Second World War*, Cambridge 2001, pp. 93–95.

¹⁰⁴ *The Struggle for Northern...*, pp. 388–390; *An Abridged History of The Greek-Italian...*, pp. 42–50, 53–62 et passim.

¹⁰⁵ D. Deletant, *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania, 1940–1944*, London 2006, p. 20; *Romania a country study*, R.D. Bachman (ed.), Washington 1989, p. 80.

¹⁰⁶ B. Koszel, *Rywalizacja niemiecko-włoska w Europie Środkowej i na Balkanach w latach 1933–1941*, Poznań 1987, pp. 316–318.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*, s. 319; *Romania...*, p. 80.

Axis states. However, the meeting in February 1941 between Prime Minister Dragiša Cvetković and Foreign Minister Alexander Cincar-Marković with Hitler and Ribbentrop ended in failure. Under German pressure, Yugoslavia's eastern neighbour – Bulgaria signed the Tripartite Pact on 1 March 1941. At the same time, German units entered the territory of Bulgaria¹⁰⁸. In the territory of Romania, heavy Wehrmacht forces were concentrated. The military action taken by Berlin was a demonstration of strength against the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Finally, after the meeting of Prince Paul with Hitler in Berchtesgaden and consultations with the Crown Council, with the opposition of some Serbian and military politicians, it was decided to accept the proposal of the Axis states¹⁰⁹. Despite growing public discontent and warnings from Great Britain, Prime Minister Cvetković finally signed the protocol for Yugoslavia's accession to the Tripartite Pact, which, however, did not enter into force because Belgrade had a coup ("March coup" on the night of 26/27 March was organised by British inspiration)¹¹⁰. The Regency was overthrown, under-aged King Peter II took power in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and the function of a prime minister was taken by General Dušan Simović¹¹¹. Upon hearing of the attack, Hitler ordered a correction of the plan against Greece and a strike also against Yugoslavia, which was to be carried out under "Plan No. 25" (Directive 25)¹¹².

The key turning point for the history of the Balkans during the Second World War are three dates: 1941, 1943 and 1945. The first of these includes: the April campaign (Balkan campaign), the control by the states of the Axis of the Peninsula and the beginning of the process of the formation of the resistance movement in Yugoslavia and Greece. Year 1943 was a "guerrilla war in full", a change in the composition of the occupation forces in connection with the surrender of Italy (the takeover of the occupation in the Balkans by the Third Reich and the collaboration forces) and the deprivation of Draža Mihajlović's support from the British. In turn, 1945 brought the total strategic gain of initiative by the resistance movement, the liberation of the Balkan states and the division of the spheres of influence between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union.

The Balkan campaign began with an air attack on 5 April, while the combined forces of the Third Reich, Italy and Hungary hit Yugoslavia and Greece from the north, south-east, east and west. In the "Marita" operation, and its extension, which included "Plan No. 25", Bulgaria did not take part, despite the pressure. After two weeks of heroic fighting by Yugoslav soldiers, the Germans and their allies managed to break up the army of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, cutting it off from the allied Greece. The defeat of the Yugoslav forces was caused by the pre-

¹⁰⁸ T. Rawski, *Wojna na Bałkanach 1941. Agresja hitlerowska na Jugosławię i Grecję*, Warszawa 1981, pp. 45–46.

¹⁰⁹ W. Felczak, T. Wasilewski, *Historia...*, p. 471; J. Kozeński, *Agresja na Jugosławię 1941*, Poznań 1979, pp. 101–104.

¹¹⁰ J. Marjanović, *Draža Mihajlović između Britanaca i Nemca*, Zagreb-Beograd 1979, pp. 31–37; J. Amery, *Approache March. A Venture in Autobiography*, London 1973, pp. 174–179; J. Kozeński, *Agresja na Jugosławię 1941...*, pp. 107–111; E. Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe in the Second World War. Studies in Russian and East European History*, London 1976, pp. 90–93; J. Tomasevich, *Četnici u Drugom Svjetskom Ratu 1941–1945*, Zagreb 1979, pp. 50–52; F. Čulinović, *Dvadeset sedmi Mart*, Zagreb 1965, pp. 197–211, 248–254 et passim.

¹¹¹ W. Felczak, T. Wasilewski, *Historia...*, p. 472.

¹¹² J. Kozeński, *Agresja na Jugosławię 1941...*, p. 113; T. Rawski, *Agresja niemiecka przeciwko Grecji i Jugosławii cz. 3*, "Wojskowy Przegląd Historyczny" 1966, no. 2, pp. 141–142; J. Tomasevich, *Četnici u Drugom Svjetskom Ratu...*, p. 61.

dominance of numbers and equipment of the aggressors, a defective plan of war, ineffective command and numerous cases of betrayal of soldiers and officers (Croats, Slovenes, Albanians and, to a lesser extent, Macedonians)¹¹³. Military operations in Greece lasted a little longer, but eventually the Greek army and the British Expeditionary Force, which supported it, were defeated and the Greek state was occupied by Italy, the Third Reich and Bulgaria¹¹⁴.

After the end of military operations in 1941, the territory of Yugoslavia and Greece was divided between the aggressors and their allies. Gorenjsko and Styria were annexed to the Reich. Hungary gained Bačka, Baranija, Međimurje and Prekomurje. In turn, Bulgaria took over Macedonia (excluding the western part), the districts of Vranjska and Pirot, a part of the areas north-east of Zaječar and in eastern Kosovo. With increasing involvement on the Eastern Front, Germany provided the Bulgarians (in December 1941) with the areas of south-eastern Serbia to the Ibar River valley. In the following years, the Bulgarian occupation zone was extended to include the area reaching the Drina River and then the Danube River¹¹⁵.

Italy annexed Notranjsko and Dolenjsko along with Ljubljana, Sušak, Dalmatia from Split to Knin, Dalmatian islands and the Boka Kotorska region. In addition, a part of Montenegro, Metohija, Kosovo (with the exception of the eastern part) and five counties in western Macedonia were added to the “Great Albania”, which was the protectorate of Italy¹¹⁶. A Croatian state was also created (independent only by name), headed by Ustaša leader Ante Pavelić. Croatian State (Independent State of Croatia; Nezavisna Država Hrvatska; hereinafter: NDH) included the territory of autonomous Croatia (except for the territories annexed by Italy and Hungary), Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sylvania¹¹⁷.

On 18 May 1941, the NDH signed an agreement with Italy, which gave the Italians full control of Croatia. The puppet state of Croatia was recognised by the Axis states and their allies (as well as by Spain, Switzerland and the Vatican)¹¹⁸. The dominant position in the NDH was gained by a fascist group associated with the pre-war Ustaša organisation, which was supported by a part of the Croatian society and Bosnia and Herzegovina. A draconian legal system was introduced on the territory of the puppet state, which led to the deportation and genocide of Serbian and Jewish people, as well as those Croatian citizens who dared to oppose the power of Croatian fascists¹¹⁹.

¹¹³ The military and political authorities of the Kingdom were aware of the complex situation in the Yugoslav army and the reluctance to serve on the part of Croats. An example of a serious crisis was the revolt in the 106th reserve infantry regiment stationed in Karlovac, during a trial mobilisation in the autumn of 1939 (not an isolated case), M. Bjelajac, *Diplomatija i Vojska. Srbija i Jugoslavija...*, p. 176.

¹¹⁴ M. Mazower, *Inside Hitler's Greece. The Experience of Occupation 1941–1944*, New Haven–London 1995, pp. 1–8.

¹¹⁵ J. Kozeński, *Agresja na Jugoslawię 1941...*, p. 157; J. Tomasevich, *Četnici u Drugom Svjetskom Ratu...*, p. 95; F. Čulinović, *Okupatorska podjela Jugoslavije*, Beograd 1970, pp. 602–606; *Oslobodilački rat naroda Jugoslavije 1941–1945, Kn. 1 (Od sloma Kraljevine Jugoslavije do drugo zasjedanja AVNOJ)*, Beograd 1963, p. 34; Z. Janjetović, *Borders of the German Occupation Zone in Serbia 1941–1944*, “Zbornik Radova: Geografski institut Jovan Cvijić” 2012, vol. 62, no. 2, pp. 104–107.

¹¹⁶ J. Tomasevich, *Četnici u Drugom Svjetskom Ratu...*, p. 93; L. Bošnjak, *Diverzantska dejstva u narodnooslobodilačkom ratu 1941–1945*, Beograd 1983, p. 19.

¹¹⁷ J. Tomasevich, *Četnici u Drugom Svjetskom Ratu...*, p. 94; W. Felczak, T. Wasilewski, *Historia...*, pp. 482–483.

¹¹⁸ J. Tomasevich, *Četnici u Drugom Svjetskom Ratu...*, p. 94.

¹¹⁹ J. Kozeński, *Agresja na Jugoslawię 1941...*, pp. 159–161; J. Tomasevich, *Četnici u Drugom Svjetskom Ratu...*, pp. 104–107; *A History of The Croats. The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Zagreb 2022, pp. 304–312;

In the occupation zones, Italian and German, cooperative authorities were established in various forms. On 30 April, they established a kind of national government in Serbia, headed in autumn 1941 by a former long-time minister and general Milutin Nedić¹²⁰. The German occupiers also collaborated with fascist Serbian politicians, including: Kosta Pečenac, Dimitrije Ljotić and Milan Aćimović. The first two set up, with the consent of the German administration, volunteer paramilitaries to support the security forces of the Third Reich. Some of the so-called Pečenac and Ljotić's Chetniks cooperated with the Mihajlović resistance movement¹²¹. A similar type of cooperative authority was created in the Italian occupation zone covering a part of Slovenia. The Slovenian groups were given limited powers, headed by General Leo Rupnik¹²².

From the end of April 1941, soldiers and officers of the royal army resumed the fight in the area of the former Yugoslavia, who did not capitulate, ignoring the act of 18 April 1941 (a little later the resistance movement in Greece and Albania joined the fight against the occupiers)¹²³. In May, German troops assisted by the Croatian militia (Ustaša) carried out a number of operations, eliminating the threat from the first Serbian chets. It was not until the middle of May 1941 that the headquarters of the Chetnica Movement was established in Ravna Gora, headed by Colonel/General Dragoljub Mihajlović. He began the formation of underground structures (Kraljevska Jugoslovenska Vojska u Otadžbini – KJVuO or JVO) based on Serbian experiences during the fight against the Ottomans and the Great War. He also established contact with the government of emigration, becoming the armed hand of the royal power in the territory of occupied Yugoslavia¹²⁴.

After the Third Reich invaded the Soviet Union, the Yugoslav Communists (the so-called partisans) also carried out military activities, headed by Josip Broz-Tito. The left-wing underground had been preparing for combat since the April defeat, organising underground structures, gathering weapons, ammunition and other means for fighting. The Communists took military action, announcing a nationwide uprising. Thus, they secured a supply of volunteers from all the regions of the State of Southern Slavs¹²⁵.

It should be noted that the characteristic feature of the resistance movement in the Balkans occupied by the Axis countries was its political division into the underground: most often associated with the government of emigration, and on the other hand – left-wing groups and parties and communists¹²⁶.

M.Ch. Kurapovna, *Shadows on the Mountain The Allies, the Resistance, and the Rivalries That Doomed WWII Yugoslavia*, New Jersey 2010, pp. 64–66.

¹²⁰ J. Kozeński, *Agresja na Jugosławię 1941...*, pp. 156–157.

¹²¹ A.J. Timofeev, *Serbskie soiuźniki Gitlera*, Moskwa 2011, pp. 20–27, 46–52, 121–171 et passim.

¹²² Th.K. Mikulan, *Axis Forces In Yugoslavia 1941–45*, Oxford 1995, p. 34.

¹²³ A. Murawski, *Góry Pindos 1943–1949*, Warsaw 2013, pp. 10–15; R.M. Kennedy, *Hold the Balkans! German Antiguerilla Operations in the Balkans (1941–1944)*, Shippensburg 2000, pp. 20–29 et passim; M. Mazower, *Inside Hitler's Greece...*, pp. 97–115, 123–137 et passim; J. Kozeński, *Agresja na Jugosławię 1941...*, pp. 163–166; M. Samardžić, *Borbe četnika Proti Nemaca i Ustaša 1941–1945. Prvi Tom*, Kragujevac 2006, pp. 7–8, 21–45 et passim.

¹²⁴ M.J. Zacharias, *Jugosławia w polityce Wielkiej Brytanii 1940–1945*, Wrocław 1985, pp. 49–50; J. Piekalkiewicz, *Wojna na Balkanach 1940–1945*, Warszawa 2007, pp. 125–132.

¹²⁵ J. Kozeński, *Agresja na Jugosławię 1941...*, pp. 166–171; J. Piekalkiewicz, *Wojna na Balkanach...*, pp. 120–123; M.J. Zacharias, *Jugosławia w polityce Wielkiej Brytanii...*, pp. 43–48.

¹²⁶ In Greece and Albania, two parallel centres of resistance were also created: connected with the government of emigration (or emigration groups) and the Communists. In Greece, these were: units subordinated to the

This duality of the resistance not only led to a growing political struggle, but also to an escalation of permanent armed conflict¹²⁷. At the same time, the main military effort against the occupation authorities and the cooperative centres was taken on by the communist parties, which throughout the occupation conducted active military activities, regardless of the terror and huge losses that were the result of the retaliatory actions of the occupation forces. A significant military effort of the resistance movement in the Balkans was directed toward the elimination of political opponents¹²⁸.

The monarchist resistance movements in Yugoslavia and Greece (to a lesser extent in Albania) received substantial financial and military aid from the British government. Britain, alone after the defeat of France, took on the trouble of fighting the Axis powers, both in occupied Europe and in other theatres of war. The Balkans were an extremely important point for London because of the food and raw materials reservoir for the Third Reich¹²⁹. The British, as part of the Special Operations Executive, established in July 1940, hereinafter: SOE, provided assistance to underground resistance structures in Yugoslavia, Greece and Albania. This secret agency of the British government was supposed to support the efforts of resistance structures in the area of conducted diversion, special operations, as well as the coordination of political and propaganda activities in the countries of Europe occupied by the Axis states. Financial and military support served to build and maintain political influence through London, hence the SOE sought to force the leaders of underground groups to cooperate in organising actions against the occupying forces and their allies¹³⁰.

From 1944, British efforts were supported by the US intelligence agency, i.e. the Office of Strategic Services, hereinafter: OSS. The Soviet Union was actively involved in the Balkan war theatre from 1943.

As a result of the growing conflict between the Chetnik movement and Tito's guerrillas, from 1944 the British began to provide extensive assistance to Tito's guerrillas, while also

National Partisan Groups, the National Hellenic Democratic League (Republican) linked to opposition groups in exile or the royal government in exile. On the opposite side stood the National Liberation Front with its armed forces, that is the Greek People's Liberation Army (ELAS). In Albania, the communist National Liberation Army operated and the monarchist Legaliteti, as well as the right-wing Balli Kombëtar (National Front). The latter was, in turn, divided into fractions, some of which advocated limited cooperation with the occupier, J. Piekalkiewicz, *Wojna na Bałkanach...*, pp. 155, 161–162; B.J. Fischer, *Albania at War...*, pp. 129–138 et passim; A. Gerolymatis, *Red Acropolis. Black Terror. The Greek Civil War and the Origins of Soviet-American Rivalry 1943–1949*, New York 2004, pp. 71–90 et passim.

¹²⁷ Another characteristic feature of the described phenomenon of the resistance movement in the years 1941–1945 was the growing importance of communist groups, which were equally active in fighting the occupiers as well as their political opponents. In order to evaluate the events and the course of the fights, it is necessary to use the term: “War of All against All” (which characterises rather the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1991–1995); J. Piekalkiewicz, *Wojna na Bałkanach...*, pp. 153, 178 et passim; M.J. Zacharias, *Jugosławia w polityce Wielkiej Brytanii...*, pp. 56–57, 61–63; J. Tomasevich, *Četnici u Drugom Svjetskom Ratu...*, pp. 140, 143, 145, 194, 199 et passim.

¹²⁸ J. Piekalkiewicz, *Wojna na Bałkanach...*, pp. 130–132, 158, 166, 168 et passim; M.Ch. Kurapovna, *Shadows on the Mountain The Allies, the Resistance, and the Rivalries That Doomed WWII Yugoslavia*, New Jersey 2010, pp. 56–58.

¹²⁹ M.J. Zacharias, *Jugosławia w polityce Wielkiej Brytanii...*, pp. 71–88, 108–113 et passim; D. Stafford, *Great Britain and the Resistance in Europe (1940–1945). Outline of the history of the Special Operations Command (SOE) and selection of documents*, Warsaw 1984, pp. 95–97, 284–285.

¹³⁰ J. Tomasevich, *Četnici u Drugom Svjetskom Ratu...*, p. 271.

eliminating Chetniks. The reason for this was the cooperation of some Chetnik commanders with the Italian and German occupiers, and the fight against the communist resistance¹³¹.

As already mentioned, from the beginning of the guerrilla war, London was striving to consolidate the resistance movement in Greece, Albania and Yugoslavia, aimed at the active fight against German and Italian forces. The tactics of permanent resistance were consistent with the strategy of Great Britain to constantly weaken the enemy, inflict the greatest possible losses, tie significant forces in the occupied countries and disrupt the production of the war industry. As Winston Churchill noted in his memoirs, the British wanted to persuade the leaders of the anti-Hitler underground to cooperate and conduct intensive actions against the Axis states and their allies¹³². In addition, the British government envoys were to build London's influence among the future leaders of the Balkan states. Another goal of the British policy was to stop the expansionist policy of the Soviet Union. A particularly active policy was pursued by the British government in Greece, realising the growing position of the communist resistance movement. In April, it was predicted that London would have to intervene in Greek affairs, also with the use of armed forces¹³³.

The political and military situation in the Balkans in the years 1939–1945 was extremely complicated. Some of the political elites after the defeat of Yugoslavia and Greece opted for cooperation with the occupation forces. Croatian politicians associated with extreme nationalist groups managed to create a substitute for a state dependent on Italy and then the Third Reich, while in occupied Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Slovenia there was a large group of supporters of the Axis states, who actively cooperated with the administration of the occupation forces. The terror and numerous crimes committed by the NDH security forces, the occupation forces and their collaborators led to the permanent resistance of the Balkan societies and peoples, which resulted in the outbreak of an uprising in Yugoslavia covering all the regions of the country¹³⁴. A similar situation took place in Greece and Albania, although the scale of the phenomenon was much smaller there.

It should be noted that the individual political groups engaged in the fight against the occupiers simultaneously fought their opponents in order to eliminate the potential opposition in order to secure full power after the end of the war.

Starting in 1944, the only real political force remaining on the battlefield were the Yugoslav, Greek and Albanian Communists, who in two described cases took power after the war, while in Greece there was a bloody civil war in which Great Britain and then the United States opted against the communist rebellion¹³⁵. Another important issue is the fact that the tragic events of the Second World War (especially in relation to the Yugoslav peo-

¹³¹ J. Marjanović, *Draža Mihajlović...*, pp. 136, 152–160, 284–299; J. Tomasevich, *Četnici u Drugom Svjetskom Ratu...*, pp. 289–301, 311–316.

¹³² W.S. Churchill, *Druga wojna światowa, Tom 5 Księga 2*, Gdańsk 1996, pp. 149–156.

¹³³ *Ibidem*, pp. 224–230.

¹³⁴ *Report from Yugoslavia, March 1943*, AIPMS, DCUR, MSW PR, Ref. A.9VI. 22/1, pp. 1–9; *Report. Situation in Croatia. London, 19 November 1943*, AIPMS, DCUR, MSW PR, Ref. A.9VI. 22/1, pp. 1–3; *Cypher telegram. L.dz.K. 1853/44 of 18 March 1944*, AIPMS, DCUR, MSW PR, Ref. A.9VI. 22/1; *Cypher telegram. L.dz.K. 1856/44 of 21 March 1944*, AIPMS, DCUR, MSW PR, Ref. A.9VI. 22/1; *Note concerning the situation in Yugoslavia...*, AIPMS, DCUR, MSW PR, Ref. A.9VI. 22/1, pp. 1–2, 7–9, 11–16, *Political and Economic Note of Southern Serbia (Yugoslav Macedonia)*, AIPMS, DCUR, MSW PR, Ref. A.9VI. 22/1, p. 5.

¹³⁵ A. Gerolymatios, *Red Acropolis...*, pp. 157–185, 195–215.

ples) had a significant impact on the fate of the Balkan states after 1945. Collaboration, war crimes, extermination and their consequences inscribed permanently in the mentality of the peoples of the Southern Slavs.

In the second half of 1944, the Greek and Yugoslav resistance movement practically took over the operational initiative, and German troops began withdrawing their forces from the Peninsula. At the same time, the Red Army entered the Balkans after Yassai-Chisinau operation, which led to the outbreak of the August Uprising in Bucharest and the overthrow of the dictatorship of Marshal I. Antonescu. Thus, the new Romanian government backed the Allies and acted against the Third Reich. The next country to withdraw from the Axis pact was Bulgaria, on whose territory the troops of two Soviet fronts entered and occupied the country practically without any fight. On 9 September 1944, the pro-Allies (pro-Soviet) government of the Fatherland Front¹³⁶ took power in Bulgaria, and on the basis of the agreement signed on 5 October 1944 in Craiova, the Bulgarian armed forces took part in the fight against Germany and its allies. By the middle of May 1945, the Balkans had been liberated from German occupation. At the same time, the authorities cooperating with the Axis countries were abolished. Yet, this did not mean the end of diplomatic games that were to shape the geopolitical architecture of the post-war Balkans. They were to be set up by the agreements and the Big Three agreements. It should be noted, however, that the Balkan issue was treated as a secondary issue during the negotiations.

As a result of the agreement concluded in October 1944 between Churchill and Stalin there were the zones of interests established in the Balkans. As the British Prime Minister pointed out in his memoirs, the question of the division of the Peninsula for the general policy of the period in question was marginal. The leaders of the allied coalition mainly talked about the geopolitical structure of the post-war world¹³⁷. The division of the Balkans was outlined by Stalin and it was as follows in percentage values: Romania: USSR 90% and western states 10%; Bulgaria: USSR 75%, and the West 25%; Greece (Great Britain in agreement with the USA) 90% and USSR 10%; Hungary and Yugoslavia half each¹³⁸.

Churchill and Stalin eventually managed to negotiate the maintenance of influence in Greece, in return the British accepted Soviet domination in Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary, which, with the takeover of power by the Communists in Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Albania, changed the geopolitical map of the Balkans for the next five decades¹³⁹.

¹³⁶ R.J. Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria*, Cambridge 2005, p. 175–179.

¹³⁷ D. Kolev, *Tajna diplomatija i interesne sfere...*, p. 373.

¹³⁸ A. Resis, *The Churchill-Stalin Secret 'Percentages' Agreement on the Balkans, Moscow, October 1944*, "The American Historical Review" 1978, vol. 83, no. 2, pp. 368–387.

¹³⁹ The shape of borders and territorial changes on the Balkan Peninsula were sealed by the signing of peace treaties with the allies of the Third Reich (Italy, Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania and Finland) at the 1947 Paris Conference. As a result of the signed agreements, Romania lost Bessarabia and northern Bukovina to the Soviet Union, while southern Dobrudja was taken over by Bulgaria (according to the arrangements of the Craiova Treaty of 7 September 1940, which was a consequence of the Second Vienna Arbitration of 30 August 1940). It regained the northern Transylvania, which was annexed by Hungary in 1940. In turn, Bulgaria, apart from acquisitions from Romania, lost Macedonia to Yugoslavia and the Aegean Sea Coast, which was within the borders of Greece. A. Kastory, *Problematyka terytorialna traktatów pokojowych z Rumunią, Bułgarią i Węgrami*

Summary

Describing the history of the Balkan nations in the first half of the 20th century, one has the impression that the stereotype that is widely used in the world of science and media, mentioning the “barbaric Balkans”, permanent instability and unpredictability of the region, largely determines the fate of the Balkan nations.

For several centuries, the Balkan elites failed to develop the right tools to resolve most of the antagonisms and disputes that their peoples experienced. Nor they managed to make the Balkan issue a regional problem that could be dealt with through an agreement. Ambitions prevailed, leading to numerous wars, crises and enormous human and material losses. As a result of the unfavourable combination of events, interference of the great powers and other factors, the Balkans were one of the most serious flashpoints in Europe and the world for more than a century and a half. Demonised, they still remain a place of numerous frozen conflicts. Nevertheless, research shows that the Balkans after the First World War were neither a key element of the European foreign and security policy nor a region that would in fact have a special impact on international relations. The Great War greatly changed the security architecture and geopolitical layout of the Peninsula. The fact is that none of the disputes between the Balkan states was resolved definitively, but great politics left the Balkans for more than half a century. The tragic period of the Second War, together with its ending, caused a renewed freeze of conflicts and only subsequent dramatic events reminded us of the Balkan demons. Once again, the world remembered the Balkans at the end of the 20th century, when Yugoslavia broke up and civil war broke out. Milovan Đilas once thought that it was a “revenge” that brought the Yugoslav nations to the brink of mindless destruction, not allowing the Slavic peoples to forgive. It created a demon of the past, which from time to time finds in the Balkans the possibility of existence during another conflict.

“*To je Balkan*” – so often say the inhabitants of this region, when they want to justify the chaos in relations between societies and states or the disorder in the organisation of everyday life. It is, therefore, difficult to rationally explain the complicated history of this part of the Old Continent. Did the Balkans actually constitute and still constitute a particularly conflict-generating place on the map of the world? Rather not, because civilised Germany, not so long ago, led to two world wars, during which more than a hundred million people died. Do we now call the German people barbaric? It is undisputed that the Balkans are a region with numerous frozen conflicts that can lead to a crisis on a global scale, as some historians, political scientists, journalists and experts claim. So far, only once in history has it happened that an event involving the representatives of one of the Balkan nations has become the direct cause of the outbreak of war on a global scale. The demonisation of the Balkans as a particular flashpoint is more a part of the particular policy of the great players in international relations than a real state of affairs. Therefore, it is necessary to revise many of the views on the history of the Peninsula and to undertake further research, which may bring answers and recommendations, what can still be done for the Balkan peoples so that they can live and develop in peace.

w obradach paryskiej konferencji pokojowej 1946 r., “Dzieje Najnowsze” 1977, year IX, vol. 1, p. 85; E. Znamierowska-Rakk, *Balkany w układach wersalskim i jaltańsko-poczdamskim...*, p. 35.

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