

Problems in the Balkans

Map A shows a region of south-eastern Europe known as the Balkans. In the years leading up to the First World War, the Balkans became the focus of great tension between some of the most powerful nations in Europe. This tension was one of the main reasons why the war eventually broke out in 1914. Why was there a crisis in this region? Which countries were involved? How did problems in the Balkans affect relations between the great powers of Europe?

Objectives

- Identify why many powerful European countries were so interested in the Balkans.
- Examine the reasons why tension built up in this region.

▼ **A** The Balkans in 1900



Russian Tsar: The Russians wanted to gain land in coastal areas in the Balkans to make trade easier and ensure that in times of war Russian battleships could get into the Mediterranean Sea from ports in the Black Sea.

▼ **SOURCE B** The cover of a French magazine in 1908; the Emperor of Austria-Hungary (on the left) and the Russian Emperor (in the centre) are shown seizing parts of the Balkans, whilst the Turkish Emperor looks on powerless

The end of an empire

The Balkans consists of several small countries. For many years, Turkey controlled these countries and they were part of the Turkish Empire (also known as the Ottoman Empire). However, by the early 1900s, the Turkish Empire was weak and different countries within the Balkans had rebelled against Turkish rule. Some, such as Greece and Serbia, had won their freedom and become independent of Turkish rule. Others, such as Bulgaria, had become **semi-independent**. This meant that Bulgarian politicians controlled everything *within* Bulgaria, but the country itself had to support Turkey in times of war. As a result of Turkey growing weaker, some of the larger nations that surrounded the Balkans (such as Austria-Hungary and Russia) saw this as an opportunity to gain land themselves and increase their influence (see Source B).



Slavs

Many of the people in the Balkans belong to an ethnic group called Slavs, which meant they all spoke similar (Slavic) languages. Many people in Serbia and Bulgaria were Slavs, for example. Serbia was the leading Slav state in the Balkans at this time and wanted to unite all Slavs into one nation (this idea was known as **pan-Slavism**).

The Balkans Crisis, 1908–9

In 1908 there was a rebellion in Turkey. Austria-Hungary took advantage of this and seized control of Bosnia, one of the small Slav states that had been under Turkish control. Nearby Serbia was angered by Austria-Hungary's invasion of a fellow Slav nation and asked Russia to take action. Russia had strong cultural and religious links to Serbia and had been a supporter of Serbia for a long time. Russia called for an international conference to discuss Austria-Hungary's actions.

The German position

Germany and Austria-Hungary were close allies, but the German Kaiser was unhappy that Austria-Hungary had taken over Bosnia. However, he promised to fully support Austria-Hungary. After all, Austria-Hungary had fully supported Germany at the Algeciras Conference in 1906 (see pages 20–21). Now Russia faced a dilemma: stand up for Serbia and Bosnia and take on both Austria-Hungary and Germany, or back down?

For now, Russia backed down. It was not prepared to risk war at this time because it felt that it was not strong enough to take on the Germans. The Bosnian Crisis of 1908–9 (sometimes known as the Balkans Crisis) had a major effect on the countries involved:

- Most people in Bosnia resented Austro-Hungarian rule and wanted to join with Serbia.
- Several secret societies were formed in Serbia and Bosnia. Their main aim was to get rid of Austro-Hungarian influence in the Balkans. Many were prepared to use violence to achieve this.
- Russia had been forced to back down against Germany. They vowed this would not happen again and began building more weapons.
- Austria-Hungary felt it now had the full support of Germany, which would affect how Austria-Hungary acted in the years to come.
- Italy was unhappy with Austria-Hungary's expansion into the Balkans. As a result, this weakened the relationship between the two countries – and the Triple Alliance.

Emperor of Austria-Hungary: Austria-Hungary was difficult to rule because several different ethnic groups within it wanted their independence. One of the largest groups was the Slavs. Nearby Serbia contained many Slavs too, and the Serbian Slavs encouraged those in Austria-Hungary to rebel. As a result, Austria-Hungary wanted to control Balkan Slav areas (like Serbia and Bosnia) so they could squash this independence movement.

Key Words

pan-Slavism
semi-independent

Work

- 1 Write out the following events, putting them in the correct chronological order:
 - Austria-Hungary takes over Bosnia
 - The Turkish Empire begins to break apart
 - Russia calls for an international conference to discuss the invasion
 - Russia backs down, unprepared to take on Germany
 - There is a rebellion in Turkey
 - Serbia asks Russia to take action against the invasion of Bosnia
- 2 Look at **Source B**.
 - a Who are the three men pictured in the source?
 - b What are each of the men doing?
 - c Why do you think the figure on the right is so unhappy?
 - d Why were Austria-Hungary and Russia so keen to take over parts of the Balkans? Try to divide these reasons into categories. Can you identify:
 - political reasons for wanting to control the Balkans
 - military reasons
 - economic reasons?
- 3 How did both the Moroccan Crises and these tensions in the Balkans
 - weaken the Alliance System
 - strengthen the Alliance System?