

ETHNIC CLEANSING FROM 1910 TO 1930 AND ITS ROLE IN THE SHAPING OF MODERN BALKAN HISTORY: A STUDY.

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Abstract: When the Ottoman Empire collapsed in 1923 independent Balkan states began to emerge but competition between ethnicities and national groups within the region culminated in violence, fear campaigns and deportations. This paper looks at the role that ethnic cleansing from 1910 until 1930 played in influencing modern Balkan history and highlights the different form of ethnic cleansing that have worked to shape the Balkan region and its people.

Historically, the Balkans were home to a diverse people who were as varied as the region's climate and geographic characteristics (Mazower, 2002, pp. 4-10). The Ottoman Empire ruled the Balkans for approximately five centuries until the empire collapsed in 1923 (Lieberman, 2013, pp. xi-xii). With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire came anarchy, rebellion, and barbarism in the Balkans. Amidst these changing times, independent Balkan states began to emerge. Each national group in the region fought for its own homogeneous nation-state and constructed itself as separate from other national groups and ethnic rivals. This competition between ethnicities and emerging nations culminated in violence, deportations, fear campaigns, and ethnic cleansing that swept across the Balkans throughout the twentieth century. Historian Benjamin Lieberman (2013) suggests that even today there are traces of ethnic and religious groups in the Balkans who have almost completely vanished from the region as a result of ethnic cleansing (Lieberman, 2013). While this paper will not dwell on the definitions of ethnic cleansing or genocide it will look at the role that ethnic cleansing played in shaping modern Balkan history from 1910 until 1930. The paper will be broken up into three main parts to highlight the different forms of ethnic cleansing that have shaped the Balkan region throughout history.

At many points in Balkan history, ethnic cleansing presented itself in a way that victimized and terrorized people in attempts to “purify” regions of those deemed ethnic enemies or rivals. The Balkan Wars took place from 1912 to 1913 and lasted just

over nine months (Lieberman, 2013, p. 53). By the end of the fighting approximately 200,000 militants had been killed along with tens of thousands of people who died of disease and dysentery (Glenny, 2001, p. 229). The Balkan Wars were not only fought on the battlefield: children, women and men were forcefully assimilated, or deported and brutalized in the name of creating more perfect nation-states (Lieberman, 2013, pp. 68-69). Lieberman argues that “the Balkan Wars provided both a general model and a specific cause for future ethnic war and ethnic cleansing” (2013, p. 79). At the end of the Second Balkan War, Balkan nationalists were still unsatisfied even though they had defeated the Ottoman Empire and the old imperial governments in the region. These Balkan nationalists wanted to create more homogenous nation-states and after witnessing the expulsions and forced assimilations of the Balkan Wars they believed that ethnic cleansing was the answer (Lieberman, 2013, p. 79). Lieberman further suggests that “anger, desire for retribution, fear of future territorial losses, and a search for scapegoats helped make ethnic cleansing and genocide not just possible but likely during World War I” (Lieberman, 2013, p. 79).

The First World War was devastating for Serbian civilians. They began to flee their homes in mass numbers in the fall of 1915 as Bulgarian forces approached Eastern and Northern Serbia (Lieberman, 2013, pp. 82-83). Whole families fled and marched through freezing November temperatures while carrying their children, their belongings and anything else they could manage to take with them. The Serbian people already knew of the massacres and violence that had befallen innocent civilians who decided to stay in the face of advancing enemy soldiers, so many Serbian civilians fled their homes out of fear (Lieberman, 2013, pp. 84-85). Mass executions, concentration camps, and deportations were all used in occupied Serbia as a means of population control (Mazower, 2002, p. 118). Under Austrian and Bulgarian occupation it is estimated that Serbia lost approximately one-quarter of its population to famine, disease, and war-related violence. Lieberman suggests that the element of national suffering caused by the First World War and the tragedies that further befell the Serbian people in the Second World War played a large role in pushing Serbia towards ethnic war in the 1980s and 1990s (Lieberman, 2013, p. 85).

The First World War brought misery and violence to the Serbian people, but for the Ottoman Greeks living in Turkey persecution began even before 1914. Terror campaigns were launched against Greeks and Armenians in Turkey as a radical plan to 'Turkify' the region and get back at Greece for their territorial gains in the Balkan Wars (Lieberman, 2013, pp. 94-7). Those in Turkey felt a sense of victimization and anger ignited by losses in the Balkan Wars and then reinforced by the events of the First World War (Lieberman, 2013, p. 99). At first, Ottoman Greeks received threats and were harassed by Turkish irregulars. By the second stage of persecution, violent forms of terror were being used against Ottoman Greeks. Homes were looted, Greek civilians were killed, and armed bands attacked and massacred Greek villages. The largest massacre of Greek civilians was in the town of Phocaea where Turkish insurgents killed approximately fifty Greek citizens (Lieberman, 2013, pp. 94-7). Mass numbers of Greek civilians began to flee their homes out of fear of persecution. The homes they abandoned were soon taken over by Muslim refugees from the Balkan Wars (Lieberman, 2013, pp. 94-7). In this way, whole ethnic communities were driven out of Turkey in an attempt to purify the region of those who were deemed undesirable or to exact revenge on ethnic enemies or rivals (Lieberman, 2013). In a similar way, but on a much more brutal scale, as many as one million Armenians were massacred in Turkey in an organized campaign that took place in 1915 and 1916. Vast numbers of civilians were massacred. Others were forced into the desert, where they were either shot or left to die of starvation, thirst, and exposure (Mazower, 2002, p. 118). Before 1914, ethnic cleansing of specific ethnic or religious groups had run rampant. By the end of the First World War ethnic cleansing had reached a new level of brutality (Lieberman, 2013, p. 118).

In the Balkans, war has often resulted also in the migration of people. Mass numbers of civilians fled their homes in times of war or conflict and minorities were dealt with in sometimes extreme and violent ways. However, ethnic cleansing can also be seen in forced population movements or government controlled deportations, both of which were organized by Balkan states (Lieberman, 2013, p. 78). The Congress of Berlin, which convened in 1878, was looked at as a way for the world's great powers to finally solve the Eastern crisis in Europe (Glenny, 2001, pp. 135-6). The preferred solution for

Eastern Europe coming out of the Congress of Berlin was a program of population exchanges, which set a precedent in the Balkans for much of the twentieth century (Glenny, 2001, p. 145). In 1923, the governments of Greece and Turkey agreed to a population exchange in which over one million Ottoman Greeks were deported to Greece and approximately 380,000 Muslims were forced into Turkey (Mazower, 2002, pp. 118-9). Civilians were given very little notice prior to departure and in most cases, authorities permitted the people to take very little with them. Through the use of population exchanges and forced deportations, whole regions could be cleansed of ethnic or religious minorities in a relatively short period of time (Lieberman, 2013, pp. 96-7). The population exchange between Greece and Turkey helped to create more ethnically homogeneous nations, but clearly with a cost. Almost two million civilians were faced with resettlement after an often traumatic expulsion from their homes (Mazower, 2002, pp. 118-9).

Some refugees did not even make it to their new countries. Crowded conditions and poor sanitation led to the spread of diseases such as typhus and meningitis. In Greek Macedonia, anger and animosity was often directed towards new refugees and locals often viewed refugees as both different and unwelcome within their new countries (Karakasidou, 1997, pp. 146-7). By the 1990s differences between locals and those same refugees were mainly superficial in Greek Macedonia since the refugees had been assimilated into the larger Greek culture and national identity. However, animosity and prejudice still existed towards descendants of refugees, especially amongst older generations (Karakasidou, 1997, pp. 158-9).

Ethnic cleansing did not always manifest in forced deportations or physical violence but was sometimes carried out through forced assimilation or the 'disappearing' of undesired cultures. Today, Thessaloniki is the second largest city in Greece but until the end of the Ottoman Empire the city was known as Salonica. Salonica was a diverse

and colourful city under Turkish rule that was home to a wide variety of people including Greeks, Bulgarians, Gypsies, Kurds, Armenians, and Jews. This diversity would come to an abrupt end, beginning in 1912. By the end of the Balkan Wars, the

demographics of cities in Greek Macedonia such as Thessaloniki / Salonika were drastically changed by population transfers and mass population flights. However, changing demographics were not the only ways that cities were purged of their ethnic and religious diversity. The government of Greece made Thessaloniki / Salonika a Greek city by changing street names to names that were decidedly Greek in origin and posting Greek officials to the city (Lieberman, 2013, pp. 77-9). A simple action such as changing a street name might be viewed as innocent in nature, but these small changes were used by victorious nation-states as a way to expel all traces of 'undesirable' cultures from the minds of the people (Lieberman, 2013). In a similar way, confiscating land from those people who had fled or who had been expelled and banning the use of surnames of certain ethnicities were also ways that governments 'cleansed' nations of those who were deemed 'undesirable' (Lieberman, 2013, p. 85). Over a relatively short period of time, whole cities could be turned from Turkish to Greek by quiet, gradual means of assimilation. In the minds of most people today, Thessaloniki is viewed as a Greek city that has always been Greek and will remain Greek for the rest of time (Lieberman, 2013, pp. 77-9).

Similar to Salonika, Guvezna (a town in Greek Macedonia) was home to a wide variety of people under Ottoman rule. Here, strong community and social relationships were valued above national ties (Karakasidou, 1997, pp. 67-9). The Christians of the region, for example, were a varied people who spoke many languages, had diverse occupations and held various social standings within the community. It was not uncommon for Greek men and Slavic-speaking women to marry one another as both Greeks and Bulgarians were recognized as Orthodox Christians. However, when the Macedonian Conflict between Greece and Bulgaria began to intensify linguistic and cultural differences amongst the people of Guvezna became political (Karakasidou, 1997, pp. 67-9). At this point, Greek men and their families banned their wives from speaking Bulgarian or any type of Slavic language. It can be assumed that in many cases there was a real threat of physical violence if these women disobeyed their husbands and were found to be speaking Bulgarian inside or outside the home (Karakasidou, 1997, pp. 70-2). Those who belonged to ethnic minorities were forced to suppress their ethnicity most often out of fear or intimidation (Mazower, 2002, p. 121).

Churches and schoolhouses were used as a primary means to teach students and congregations about identity, culture, and what it meant to be a Greek citizen within Greek Macedonia (Karakasidou, 1997, pp. 95-6). The children who were the products of Greek / Slavic marriages in towns like Guvezna would consequently learn the language and the culture of their Greek fathers, both at school and at home, while their mother's Slavic heritage would be lost to them. In this way, Slavic or Bulgarian culture was almost completely wiped out of Greek Macedonia as people were forced to assimilate into a greater Greek culture (Karakasidou, 1997, pp. 70-2).

Over the course of the twentieth century, ethnic cleansing was used in various forms as a means to create more ethnically homogeneous nation-states. Competition between ethnicities and emerging nations culminated in genocidal violence, fear campaigns, deportations, and assimilation that swept across the Balkans. It is often difficult to separate the different forms of ethnic violence from one another because fear and intimidation, forced population movements, and assimilation were usually all present when ethnic violence was perpetrated against ethnic or religious minorities. Historian Mark Mazower suggests that the West often dismissed violence in the Balkans as primal and "unmodern" but it is important to remember that ethnic cleansing was not unique to the Balkans as a region (Mazower, 2002, pp. 154-6). The ethnic cleansing and terror that was witnessed in the Balkans was not caused by backwardness, a perceived orientalism, or a lack of sophistication. Instead, as Lieberman suggests, "it was a newer phenomena: the rise of nationalism and the emergence of modern states" that fueled ethnic violence in the past and that continues to shape modern Balkan history today (Lieberman, 2013, pp. 77-9). []

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