

Franz-Josef Kos. *Die politischen und wirtschaftlichen Interessen Österreich-Ungarns und Deutschlands in Südosteuropa 1912/1913: Die Adriafragen-, die Saloniki- und die Kavallafrage*. Vienna and Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 1996. 273 pp. ATS 476 (paper), ISBN 978-3-205-98329-3.

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Wishful Thinking in Vienna: Austro-Hungarian Aims During the Balkan Wars

Franz-Josef Kos's highly nuanced and richly detailed analysis of Austria-Hungary's political and economic aims during the Balkan Wars fills a gap in the literature. Kos justifiably maintains that these aims hitherto have been treated in isolation or "examined around the edges." He therefore set himself the task of "comprehending these [aims] as a whole and integrating them into the framework of Austro-Hungarian policy" in the period between the outbreak of the First Balkan War and the Peace of Bucharest which ended the second one. Austria-Hungary's efforts to realize its aims are seen against the background of the other Great Powers, especially its Triple Alliance partners Italy and Germany—and the interests that shaped their policies. The author also pays attention to forces impinging on decision making in the Balkan states.

Whether intended or not, Kos's study complements Michael Behnen's *Ruestung-Buendnis-Sicherheit: Dreibund und informeller Imperialismus, 1900-1908*.^[1] That work analyzes the transformation of the Triple Alliance, brought about by Germany's turn to *Weltpolitik*, Austria-Hungary's striving after 1903 to restore its control of Serbia following the collapse of its informal imperialism in that small kingdom, and the kindling of Italy's imperialistic aspirations in the western half of the Balkan Peninsula. The conflicts within the Triple Alliance—especially between the "allied enemies," Italy and Austria-Hungary—that resulted from the interplay of economic interests, security considerations, and informal imperialism, meant the Triple Alliance was no longer a

guarantor of peace. Kos's book can be seen as an examination of the subsequent evolution of the alliance, when it changed again during the Balkan wars, from a defensive to an offensive arrangement, as the Dual Monarchy managed to pull Germany even further into Balkan affairs than it did during the Annexation Crisis of 1908-1909.

Kos is thoroughly familiar with his subject, having earlier published a book on Austria-Hungary's policy during the Eastern Crisis of 1875-1879.^[2] That study focuses on the politics of the military and the relationship between the political and military leadership, subjects that figure prominently in the work reviewed here. It shows that the Habsburg military leadership was already politicized in the 1870s, much earlier than usually thought.^[3] The author makes much use of archival material in Vienna and Bonn, as well as printed sources and a considerable number of secondary works. Curiously, in view of the emphasis on economic aims, there are no references to documents from the administrative section of the Austro-Hungarian foreign ministry which housed its economic departments, and which Michael Behnen used effectively in his previously mentioned book. Kos's exceptionally rich footnotes provide textual elaboration of important issues and comparisons of his findings with those of other historians.

The book contains five chapters. The first chapter examines Austria-Hungary's reaction to the victory of the Balkan League (Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, and

Greece) in the First Balkan War against Turkey. The Dual Monarchy, with its large South Slavic population, confronted a strengthened Serbian nationalism and a perceived threat to its status as a Great Power by the closing off of the Balkan peninsula, the only arena for imperialist activity left to it. Kos describes Austro-Hungarian political leaders as vacillating in the crisis between defensiveness and aggressiveness, between the fear of becoming the new “sick man of Europe” and the view that the time had come “to regulate anew relations with them [the Balkan states] by peaceful means or by war” (p. 16). From Kos’s own account, it seems to me that, rather than having polarized reactions, the two were intimately related in that the latter was fueled by the former.

Kos reports in great detail the debates within the foreign policy and military elites over the proper course of action for the Monarchy. *Ballhausplatz* (the foreign ministry) officials and the generals shared the same long range goals: the establishment of Austro-Hungarian predominance in the Balkans, or at least the western half of the peninsula, and the reduction of Serbia to an Austro-Hungarian satellite, if not its incorporation into the Monarchy. They differed on the means to achieve those goals. With a few exceptions, Foreign Minister Count Leopold Berchtold and his associates favored diplomatic means, while the army leadership, again with a few exceptions, were all for the use of military force. Even the usually pacific Archduke Franz Ferdinand was affected by this belligerent mood. He advocated the necessity of “a certain activism in order to shake Austria-Hungary out of its lethargy,” and strongly supported a war to deny Serbia an Adriatic port in the beginning of December 1912 (p. 75). The crisis passed and the heir to the throne returned to his war-avoidance stance. Kos speculates that the archduke may have been influenced by the head of his military chancellery, Colonel Karl Bardolff. Franz Ferdinand’s commitment to peace, as Robert Kann points out, was based on the temporary incapacity of the Monarchy to play the role of a Great Power. After internal consolidation, which presumably would have taken place when he became emperor, Austria-Hungary would pursue an aggressive foreign policy.[4]

Kos’s presentation of Vienna’s initial reaction to the war is confusing. After its outbreak, Austria-Hungary agreed not to intervene and to accept changes in the Balkan status quo on the condition that the other powers acceded to Austro-Hungarian demands for assured access to the port of Salonica and an independent Albania, which they did (p. 231). Kos then says that after the Great Powers failed to take effective action to prevent the

outbreak of the First Balkan War, Berchtold decided to pursue his demands through bilateral negotiations with the Balkan states in which his original economic aims became subordinated to political objectives (pp. 222, 232). But Berchtold’s original demands already took the breakdown of peace into consideration.

The subordination of economic to political aims is equally confusing. It seems to me that political aims had priority from the beginning. In fact there is not as much information about Austro-Hungarian economic interests in the Balkan peninsula as the title of the book suggests. In any event, it is evident that political concerns played a large role in three bilateral, alternative courses of action decided on by *Ballhausplatz* officials, at the end of October: 1) a customs union with Serbia; 2) a customs union with Romania, Serbia and Montenegro and, in the best case scenario, one with all of the states of the Balkan League; and 3) an understanding with Bulgaria. An ancillary aim of all of the plans was the destruction of the Balkan Alliance. Chapter two discusses the first two alternatives; chapters three and four the third. These plans, it should be noted, were drawn up without any prior consultation with the Austrian and Hungarian governments, which resisted a customs union with Serbia, and without taking into account the opposition of powerful landed interests in both halves of the Monarchy to the integration of agrarian states.

Kos does not say so directly, but the customs union plans and the understanding with Bulgaria were exercises in wishful thinking, even discounting the internal opposition. They all involved curtailment of the independence of the Balkan states, preventing their industrial growth, or suggesting unrealistic territorial exchanges. For example, a customs union would have returned Serbia to the condition of dependency from which it had freed itself during the customs war waged against it by Austria-Hungary from 1906 to 1910. The customs union with Montenegro involved Mt. Lovcen, the strategic mountain overlooking the Austrian port of Cattaro, to the Dual Monarchy in exchange for the exclusively Albanian city of Scutari. This improbable idea would have sacrificed Albanian national rights which Berchtold publicly supported. The linchpin of the plan to draw Bulgaria closer to Austria-Hungary was Austro-Hungarian support for its claim to Salonica. However, Greece had already occupied Salonica, and there was no inclination on the part of the Great Powers, including Italy and Germany, to dislodge it by force. Kos writes, somewhat incredulously, that during the negotiations with Bulgaria, Berchtold “had not thought about how he would force

Greece to evacuate Salonica in favor of Bulgaria” (p. 160). A scheme to reconcile Bulgaria and Romania, countries which had very bad relations, and attach them to the Triple Alliance, failed because Bulgaria refused to cede territory to Romania in exchange for obtaining Salonica. Berchtold went ahead with the project anyway, blithely assuming that the alienation between the two countries was transitory. By pursuing such chimerical political goals, Berchtold failed to realize an important economic aim. His futile opposition to Greek possession of Salonica prevented him from accepting an advantageous “special position” there, offered by the Greek government in return for recognizing its claim to Salonica (p. 135).

The only diplomatic victories achieved by Austria-Hungary had nothing to do with its bilateral negotiations with the Balkan states. The creation of an independent Albania, and the block to keep Serbia from obtaining a port on the Adriatic coast were the result of the London Conference of Ambassadors which the Great Powers convened in December 1912 to prevent the escalation of the Balkan War into a conflict that might have embroiled them. The Dual Monarchy paid a high price for those victories. Its intransigent opposition to Serbia acquiring a port on the Adriatic (or anywhere else) led to its isolation within the concert of the powers. Kos maintains that it would have been wiser for Austria-Hungary to try to improve relations with Serbia by satisfying Serbia’s wish for a port by supporting its acquisition of one somewhere on the Aegean, to the east of Salonica. The Serbian government approached Vienna with such a proposal, but, as Kos ruefully concludes, “...for a long time such ideas had no place on the Monarchy’s political agenda” (p. 224).

The diplomatic situation was only slightly less frustrating for Austria-Hungary than its negotiations with the Balkan states. It met with opposition not only from the Entente Powers, but also from its two allies, which was more troublesome. Russia strongly supported Serbia on the issue of an Adriatic port, and was supported by its allies. French leaders went so far as announcing that they would back Russia in the event of war (p. 90), but England let Russia know it was unwilling to risk a war over the port question. In the end French encouragement counted for less than British reluctance in moderating Russia’s behavior.

Italy was the more accommodating Austro-Hungarian ally. It supported Vienna in the question of autonomy for Albania, chiefly as a way of keeping it out of Austria-Hungary’s hands, and in preventing Serbia from acquiring a port on the Adriatic Sea, which would

have established it as a rival power there. On the other hand, Italy opposed Austria-Hungary’s customs union plans as threats to its own plans for economic expansion in Southeast Europe. Germany simply exasperated the men on the *Ballhausplatz*. Berlin’s policy makers (Alfred von Kiderlen-Waechter and Gottlieb von Jagow) opposed Vienna on their customs union plans and their approach to Bulgaria. Even more, they accused *Ballhausplatz* officials of being paranoid about the threat posed by Serbia to Austria-Hungary’s existence, and Berchtold and his associates in turn chafed at what they regarded as a lack of understanding of the Dual Monarchy’s situation. The divergent interests behind these mutual recriminations stemmed from the fact that Berlin’s interest in the Balkans was of a secondary nature, while Balkan policy constituted a “Lebensfrage” for Vienna (p. 222).

Kos maintains that the dominant motive behind Germany’s opposition to its ally’s expansionist Balkan economic and political aims was fear of being drawn into Balkan conflicts for interests that were not its own. He discounts any significant effect of the Austro-German Balkan economic rivalry on the alliance relationship. Yet Austro-Hungarian leaders complained bitterly about their ally’s ruthless pursuit of its economic aims. F.R. Bridge writes that in the decade before the war the two allies carried on “what was virtually a commercial war...in the Near East... that gravely damaged the interests of Austria-Hungary.”^[5] Be that as it may, Kos sees that same fear of involvement behind the determination of the leaders in Berlin to regain the leadership of the Triple Alliance which they saw as having passed to Austria-Hungary during the era of Berchtold’s predecessor, Count Alois von Aehrenthal. The German plan for a Greek-Romanian-Turkish alliance (chimerical in view of Greek-Turkish antagonism), as opposed to an Austro-Hungarian sponsored Romanian-Bulgarian one, was a manifestation of that restoration effort (p. 178).

In the end, for all of its fears about being drawn into Balkan affairs and its criticism of Austro-Hungarian inflexibility toward Serbia, Germany was too dependent in its alliance with Austria-Hungary (a detente with Great Britain proved evanescent) to withhold its support when it appeared that its ally’s status as a Great Power was at stake. Germany unequivocally supported Austria-Hungary’s military policy to force Serbia, in October 1913, to evacuate northern Albania. The Dual Monarchy had effectively managed to harness German power to Habsburg interests at the same time that Austria-Hungary’s position worsened. That created an “explosive potential” that detonated in 1914 (p. 238). Kos main-

tains that the blast could have been avoided if Germany and Great Britain had restrained their allies—Austria-Hungary and Russia—in 1914 as they did in 1912-1913. Most of the restraining, however, appears to be done by Great Britain (pp. 87, 90).

Kos concludes that the Balkan wars were a disaster for Austria-Hungary. It failed to realize any of its economic aims, and the mobilizations in 1912-1913 were financially ruinous. While it succeeded in disrupting the Balkan alliance, it derived no advantages from that. Bulgaria did not become tied to the Dual Monarchy, Serbia was neither eliminated nor neutralized, and Romania drifted away from the Triple Alliance. Russia, too, did not succeed in its design of dominating southeastern Europe with the help of the Balkan League, but it strengthened its role as protector of Serbia, and the future offered possibilities for the expansion of its influence. At the same time, the growing independence of the Balkan states further undermined the already diminished effectiveness of Austria-Hungary as a Great Power by opening a second front in the Balkans which had the potential to absorb a good portion of the Dual Monarchy's military resources.

Critical as he is of Berchtold's diplomacy, Kos blames the European power system for having done too little to satisfy the needs of Austria-Hungary as a Great Power (p. 232). But he does not specify what those needs were or how they might have been satisfied. After all, it was internal problems that sapped the strength of the Monarchy and weakened its position in the power system and not the other way around. In point of fact, however, the European power system did support the existence of Austria-Hungary as necessary to the proper functioning of the balance of power system and to prevent a power vacuum in East Central Europe which could lead to a war among the Great Powers to fill it. What might be called its sheltered position ended with the outbreak of World War I, unleashed by Austria-Hungary's declaration of war against Serbia. The Dual Monarchy became expendable when it was reduced to a German satellite during the war.[6]

Kos does not probe very deeply the reasons for Austria-Hungary's ineffective diplomacy. He suggests the failure lay partly in the leadership and operation of the foreign ministry. Unlike Aehrenthal, his predecessor, who was very decisive and kept his subordinates on a tight rein, Berchtold felt very inadequate in his post, "took little joy in making decisions," and was easily influenced by his subordinates who "could frequently implement their own ideas" (p. 76). The most prominent

subordinates consisted of a group of younger diplomats, such as Counts Alexander Hoyos and Friedrich Szapary, imbued with the idea learned from their revered patron, Aehrenthal, that the Dual Monarchy could only be saved from disintegration by a dynamic foreign policy. After Aehrenthal's death in February 1912, his proteges gave his teachings a decidedly aggressive twist. While they were not united on the question of war in 1912-1913, as they were in July 1914, their underlying view of the necessity of aggressive actions to refurbish Austria-Hungary's image as a Great Power probably contributed to the intransigence of Vienna's policy in regard to Serbia's desire for an Adriatic port.[7]

More generally, Kos concludes that Austria-Hungary simply "failed to learn any lessons from its customs war with Serbia" (p. 234). The war of the Balkan states was directed not only against Turkey, and indirectly against the Dual Monarchy, "but also against the tutelage of the Great Powers, which hitherto had shaped the situation in southeast Europe according to their own lights and had shown little consideration for the interests of the peoples there" (p. 234). Kos sees the decision for war in Vienna in July 1914, as a manifestation of a "desire for the downfall," which was shared by the military and foreign policy elites. The reigning mood was "better to go down with glory than renounce the role of a Great Power" (p. 237). Kos does not inquire into the deeper roots of that mood, but it was symptomatic of the curious paradox of elite anticipations of dissolution and considerable social and economic progress in the Habsburg Monarchy before 1914 that deserves further exploration.[8]

Kos offers two observations on the relevance of the first two Balkan Wars to the Balkan War of 1991-1995. First, the collapse of Yugoslavia and the dissolution of Czechoslovakia has called into question the order established at Versailles. That is true, but not in the sense that Kos appears to mean. Events in the former Socialist east central Europe since 1989 have extended rather than invalidated that order. Those nations that did not gain statehood after the collapse of multinational empires at the end of World War I—e.g. Croatia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine—seized the opportunity afforded them by the downfall of the Soviet Empire to become nation-states. It remains to be seen if the nation states in East Central Europe will be superceded by a pan-European federation or confederation. Second, Kos sees many of the problems that dominate Southeast Europe rooted in the period 1912-1913 (e.g. Kosovo and the conflict between Greece and Macedonia). However, I think the roots reach back even farther, at least to the Congress

of Berlin in 1878. It was there that the Great Powers first carved up Ottoman Europe without the slightest reference to the Balkan peoples themselves. That set the pattern for over a hundred years.

My critical comments notwithstanding, Kos has written a valuable book. His balanced and dispassionate analysis of the ineffectualness of Austro-Hungarian diplomacy, Triple Alliance relations, Austro-Serb antagonism, and the independent strivings of the southeast European states offer fresh perspectives on old issues. The book is likely to remain the standard work on its subject for some time.

Notes:

[1]. Tuebingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1985.

[2]. Franz-Josef Kos, *Die Politik Oesterreich-Ungarns waehrend der Orientkrise 1874/75-1879* (Vienna: Boehlau Verlag, 1984).

[3]. Istvan Deak sees the politicization as having occurred after 1900. See Deak, *Beyond Nationalism: A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps 1848-1918* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 8.

[4]. Robert A. Kann, *Erzherzog Franz Ferdinand Studien* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1976), 220.

[5]. F.R. Bridge, *From Sadowa to Sarajevo: The Foreign Policy of Austria-Hungary, 1866-1914* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 389.

[6]. On the "Aehrenthal Gruppe" and its influence on Berchtold see, John Leslie, "Oesterreich-Ungarn vor dem Kriegaubbruch: Der Ballhausplatz in Wien im Juli 1914 aus der Sicht eines Oesterreichisch-ungarischen Diplomaten," in *Deutschland und Europa in der Neuzeit: Festschrift fuer Karl Otmar Freiherr von Aretin zum 65. Geburtstag* ed. Ralph Melville, et al., (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1988). 661-84.

[7]. On the idea of "sheltering" see, Solomon Wank, "The Disintegration of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires: a Comparative Analysis," in *The End of Empire? The Transformation of the USSR in Comparative Perspective* ed. Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrot (Armonk NY: M.E Sharpe, 1997), pp. 119-138.

[8]. For a brief discussion of that paradox, see *ibid.*, pp. 95-101.

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