

2.1 The causes of the conflict



THE BOILING POINT.

▲ A cartoon entitled "The boiling point", published in the British satirical magazine *Punch* in October 1912. It shows the major European powers attempting to keep the Balkans under control as war threatens

Conceptual understanding

Key concepts

- Causation
- Significance
- Perspective

Key question

- How did nationalism cause the outbreak of the First World War?

The development of Albanian nationalism in the 20th century

In order to understand what took place in the last decade of the 20th century in the Balkans, it is necessary to go back to the beginning of the century. In 1900, neither Kosovo nor Yugoslavia existed independently. The Balkan peninsular was considered a poor, backward part of Europe that had been ruled by the Ottoman Empire for almost 500 years. Bordered in the north by the old Austro-Hungarian Empire, itself a ramshackle collection of nationalities and the Tsarist empire of Russia, the Balkans constituted a mass of ethnic groups consisting of Christian, Orthodox, Muslim and Jew, all nominally under the control of foreign rulers.

Albanian nationalists had begun to flex their muscles following the Congress of Berlin in 1878, when some of them met in the small town of Prizren in Kosovo and created the League of Prizren. This was formed

to defend their language and culture, which were threatened by the imminent collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Around 750,000 Albanians lived within the Ottoman Empire, concentrated mainly in present-day Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia and Greece, and had served the Ottomans in many ways disproportionate to their small numbers. They had been valued mercenaries in the army, had led commercial enterprises and had been advisers to the Sultans. About 70% of Albanians adopted Islam; some were Catholic and others Orthodox Christian, like the majority of people in the Balkan states. Albanian



▲ The Balkans around 1910, showing the Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman Empires



nationalists had gained little out of the Congress of Berlin though. When others, such as Serbia and Romania, had their independence confirmed, Albania remained subject to Ottoman rule. The growth of Albanian nationalism in Kosovo challenged Serbian aspirations there. It was to be another 30 years before the First Balkan War concluded that Albania was to gain its statehood, and then only as a result of a compromise deal.

The Balkan Wars, 1912–13

Due to political upheavals and power politics, the region of the Balkans and beyond was caught up in “great power” rivalry that was to eventually result in the inferno of the First World War. This was, up until then, the largest and most destructive conflict in world history. Immediately prior to this, the Balkans had experienced two wars that had deprived the Ottoman Empire of almost all its remaining European territory. These wars also confirmed Serbia as the aggressive new power in the Balkans and saw the emergence of the new state of Albania. The First Balkan War in 1912 was a loose alliance of Balkan states, consisting of Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Montenegro, up against the ailing “sick man of Europe”, the Ottoman Empire. These states formed the Balkan League with Russian support early in 1912 – originally to break Macedonia away from Turkey’s control. At the time, Turkey was already engaged in a war with Italy; when Montenegro began the First Balkan War by attacking the Turks in October 1912, the other Balkan states soon followed.

The Balkan allies were quickly victorious, and the Turkish collapse was followed by an armistice in December 1912 and a peace conference in London. The Treaty of London, signed in May 1913, removed almost all of the Ottoman Empire’s remaining European territory, including the whole of Macedonia and Albania. Serbia had wanted to gain control of Albania to give them access to the sea and was opposed in this ambition by Austria-Hungary who, having already annexed the province of Bosnia in 1908, wanted Albania too. As rivals in the area, the Russians opposed this and, as a concession, Macedonia was divided among the Balkan allies, with Albanian independence insisted upon by the European powers. In 1913, Albania gained its sovereignty just a year before war broke out in Europe.

The Second Balkan War began almost immediately, when Serbia, Greece and Romania quarrelled with Bulgaria over the division of Macedonia. In June 1913, Serbia and Greece made an alliance against Bulgaria and defeated their former ally. Under the terms of the treaty signed in August, Bulgaria was left with a tiny portion of Macedonia while the remainder was given to Serbia and Greece.

The Balkan Wars were the first all-European conflicts of the 20th century; the NATO intervention in Kosovo 90 years later was to be the last of that turbulent century. These early Balkan Wars have been submerged under the much greater conflict that followed less than a year later, but have been called “*the first phase of the First World War*” (Hall, 2000). However, these bloody wars were significant in that they introduced an age of modern warfare that saw mass armies, industrial warfare and civilian displacement on a large scale. Conflict that began in the Balkan Peninsula in 1912 would continue in Europe, with short interruptions, up to 1945, and then emerge again in the last decade of the century when the Balkans again became an arena for nationalist conflict following the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1991.



▲ The Balkan Peninsula after the First and Second Balkan Wars in 1912–13

The Balkans and the First World War

For many Serbs and other Slavs living in the Balkans under foreign rule at the time, Serbia was seen as their champion. Unfortunately, it was one of these young radicals, a Bosnian Serb named Gavrilo Princip, whose shots killed the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Franz Ferdinand, and his wife Duchess Sophie, on their visit to Sarajevo on 28 June 1914. Six weeks later, most of Europe was at war. The Balkan Wars and the First World War were devastating for the people of the Balkans as well as for both Kosovo and Albania. Even though Albania managed to maintain a precarious neutrality during the First World War, all its neighbours were involved in the conflict and the effects were felt throughout the region. Balkan nationalism was challenged by Austria-Hungary but, as its military threat diminished, some feared that Italy would exercise its claims to the Dalmatian coast. Another threat to Balkan and Albanian nationalism was that, with victory, Serbia and Italy might carve up what had been the former Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires in the Balkans.



Meanwhile, in October of 1918, Serbia managed to occupy Kosovo, which many Serbs regarded as their own heartland, reclaiming the battlefield of Kosovo where their ancestors had died in 1389. The majority Albanian population of Kosovo was uneasy; Albanians were not Slavs and were unhappy that Kosovo had not been incorporated into Albania. For much of the world, though, Serbia had been little David standing up to mighty Goliath, and the spoils of war were going to the victors.

The Balkan Peninsula between the wars: the creation of Yugoslavia

A number of new states in central, eastern and south-eastern Europe emerged out of the First World War, many of them created from the defeat and partial destruction of the four major empires. These empires were those of Imperial Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary and Ottoman Turkey. The allies (France, Britain, the USA and Italy) felt that compensation of some kind should be offered to Serbia and so a new union was proclaimed, which was officially named the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. In 1929, it was renamed Yugoslavia (literally, "land of the South Slavs"). Yugoslavia was therefore a nation born out of the ashes of the First World War and consisted of a fusion of the provinces of Slovenia and Croatia, together with Serbia and Montenegro. Also included in the new state was Bosnia, a province that was an ethnic and religious mixture of Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats and Muslim Slavs. In the south of Yugoslavia lay the small province of Kosovo, made up of a majority of Albanians, which had not been given to Albania but rather to Serbia.

For over 20 years, the federation, dominated by Serbia, held together fairly well. As the largest ethnic group in the Balkans, Serbia maintained that it should take the lead and, due to the price it had paid in gaining independence for the region, should dominate the federation. Others, such as the Croats and Slovenes, argued for a federation to balance the economic and political dominance of Serbia. Ultimately, it was the failure of politicians to secure such an agreement that eventually resulted in the break-up of Yugoslavia at the end of the century.

The Balkan states that emerged out of the First World War still remained highly unstable: each of the states, old and new, faced the challenges of economic underdevelopment, ethnic tensions and weak institutions. Every country was to experience stresses that would eventually be resolved by the establishment of some form of military or monarchical dictatorship.



THE POWER BEHIND.

AUSTRIA (at the ultimatum stage). "I DON'T QUITE LIKE HIS ATTITUDE. SOMEBODY MUST BE BACKING HIM."

- ▲ A cartoon from the UK magazine *Punch*, published in 1914, showing Austria-Hungary, Serbia and Russia (behind the rock)

ATL Communication skills


Go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8ZLj7x1vN4.

Watch the footage of King Aleksandar's official visit to France and his assassination.

Yugoslavia, as a federation, had to struggle with each of its neighbours (with the exception of Greece) in the decades between the wars, but it was the Italians who probably caused the most problems. The killing of the Croatian leader Stjepan Radić in 1928 prompted the Serbian monarch King Aleksandar to declare a dictatorship the following year. The king himself was assassinated in Marseilles in 1934 by Croatian extremists, during an official visit to France.



▲ The Yugoslav state and the federated states in the 1930s

Bulgaria and Romania both became more authoritarian as economic and political problems developed in the 1930s; the Greeks had their parliament dissolved and a dictatorship developed under Ioannis Metaxas. Turkey, too, became a one-party state under Kemal Atatürk until his death in 1938.

The people of Kosovo, now nominally under Serb rule, found themselves caught up in the internal politics of Albania when Albania's interior minister, Ahmed Zogu, seized power in 1922. Later, in 1928, he declared himself the self-styled King Zog of the Albanians. Despite its nominal independence, Albania was effectively a puppet state under Italian influence for the remainder of the time prior to its annexation, six months before the Second World War broke out in 1939.

King Zog of the Albanians

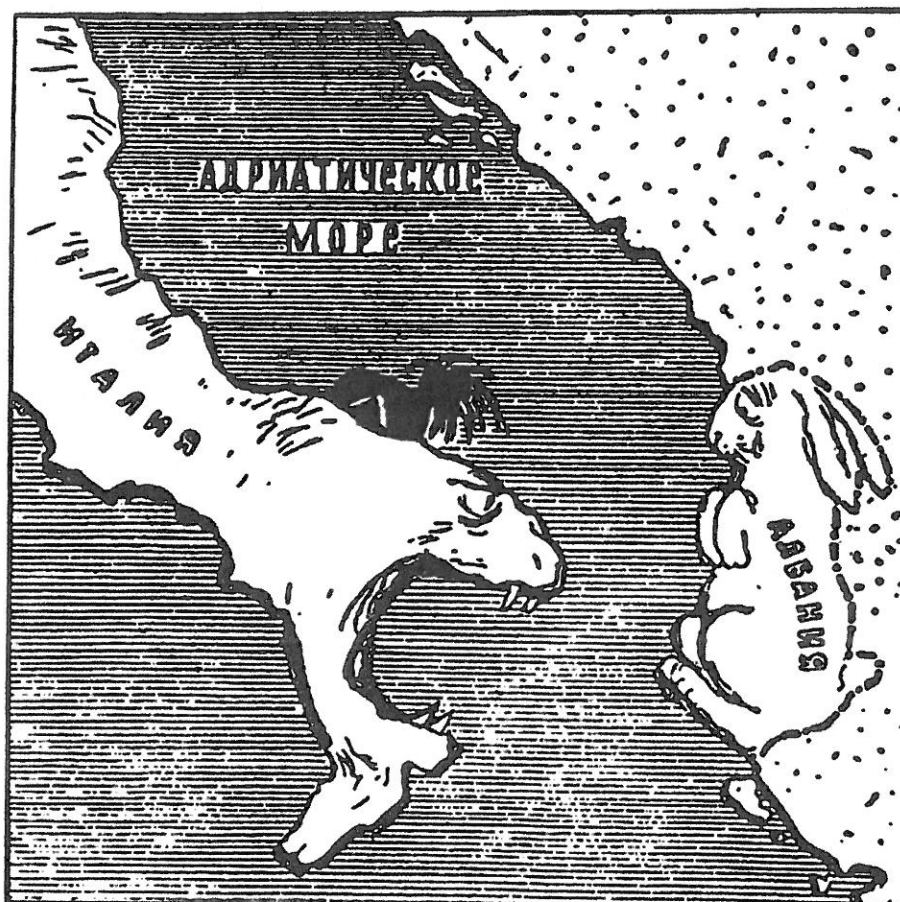
Born Ahmet Muhtar Bej Zogolli in 1895, he took the surname Zogu after 1922, when he gained power in Albania. He led the country from 1925 to 1939, and declared himself king in 1928. He is the only Muslim king ever to have ruled in Europe. Zog tried to modernize his country by building roads, schools and promoting public health and education. His supporters (or Zogists) claimed that he had inherited a throne with an Albanian line going back 2,500 years. He adopted the symbol of the

double-headed black eagle on a crimson background, which he took from the great Skanderbeg, who had led a rebellion against the Turks in the 15th century.

Zog wanted to be treated as an equal to the monarchies of Yugoslavia, Romania and Bulgaria, yet the established monarchies shunned him. He married a 22-year-old Hungarian countess in 1938 and they had a son the following year. In 1939, he fled Albania after Mussolini's troops invaded and never returned. Zog died in France in 1961.



Albania was swallowed up by Mussolini's Italy in April 1939. Then, in April 1941, the Axis Powers (consisting of Germany, Italy, Japan and Hungary) invaded Yugoslavia and occupied the whole of the Balkan Peninsula.



▲ A Soviet cartoon showing Italian designs on little Albania

ATL Thinking and communication skills

Read the source below and answer questions 1 and 2 that follow. Then discuss question 3 with a partner.

In 1937, Vaso Cubrilović, a historian at Belgrade University, wrote the following. [Note: Cubrilović had taken part in the Black Hand plot to kill Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914.]

Judah, T. 2008. *Kosovo: What everyone needs to know*. Oxford, UK. Oxford University Press.

The only way and the only means to cope with them is the brute force of an organised state ... if we do not settle accounts with them at the proper time, within 20–30 years we shall have to cope with a terrible irredentism [a national policy which supports the acquisition of some region in another

country for reasons of sharing a common linguistic, cultural, historical, ethnic or racial ties], the signs of which are already apparent and which will inevitably put all our southern territories in danger. Who would object to such a policy ... when Germany can expel tens of thousands of Jews and Russia can shift millions of people from one part of the continent to another?

Questions

- 1 How does the source demonstrate a racist attitude?
- 2 How does the writer attempt to justify his position?
- 3 With a partner, discuss the difference between nationalism and racism.

Yugoslavia in the Second World War

This country can only be a Croatian country, and there is no method we would hesitate to use in order to make it truly Croatian and cleanse it of Serbs, who have for centuries endangered us and who will endanger us again if they are given the opportunity.

— Miroslav Žanić, 1941

It took less than two weeks for the Germans to force the surrender of Yugoslavia, following which, German, Italian and Hungarian troops occupied the divided country. Old ethnic divisions surfaced into what was to become a very bitter civil war. This conflict primarily pitted the Croats (who allied themselves with the Axis Powers) against the Serbs. The leader in Croatia, Ante Pavelić, took the opportunity to begin a campaign against the non-Croatian minorities, Serbs, Roma gypsies and Jews, which was effectively a genocide. He carried this out through the Ustaša, the fascist movement that ruled Croatia during the war. The word *ustaša* means “rise up” or “insurgence” in Croat; the organization’s aim was to achieve Croatian independence from Yugoslavia, and its members modelled themselves on the Italian fascist movement. The impact of this campaign, brutal even by German standards, had an important impact on future relations within the Balkans and particularly for Serbo–Croat interactions. The Croatian state set up concentration camps in the country. The largest was at Jasenovac, near Zagreb, where tens of thousands were killed, the majority of them Serbs. In total, an estimated 500,000 people were killed during these years and more expelled to become refugees in the Balkans. The US Holocaust Memorial Museum estimates that the Croatian Ustaša regime murdered between 80,000 and 100,000 people in Jasenovac between 1941 and 1945.



▲ Chetnik group photographed in 1944

Yugoslav resistance to the Axis occupation came from two major factions: the royalists and heavily pro-Serbian *Chetniks*, led by Draža Mihailović, and the partisans led by Josip Broz Tito. The word *Chetnik* comes from the Serbo-Croatian *Četnik*, or *čete*, meaning “armed band”. *Chetniks* were formed to resist the Axis invaders and Croatian collaborators. Tito’s movement consisted largely of communists, but both factions resisted the occupying German forces. However, political differences soon led to armed conflict between the *Chetniks* and the partisans. In later years, partially due to brutal reprisal killings by the Germans against Yugoslav

insurgents, Mihailović came to favour a more restrained policy of resistance. However, Tito’s partisans remained much more aggressive and, in 1944, the Allies switched their support from Mihailović to Tito.

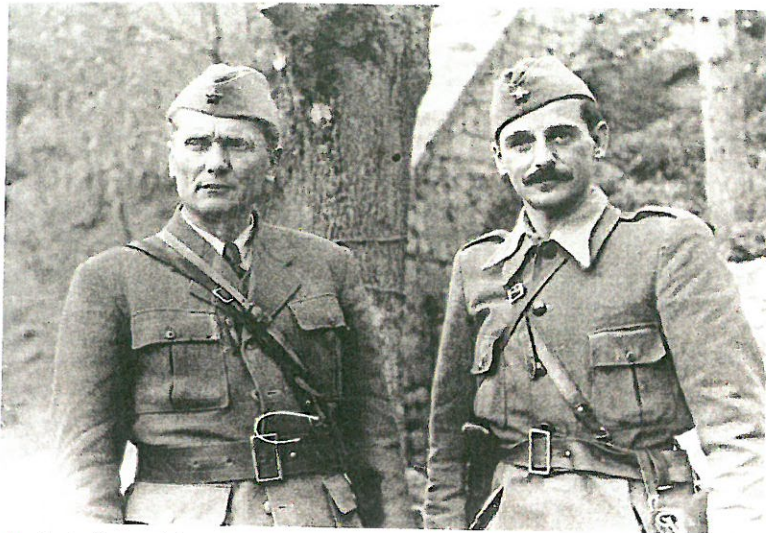


After the war, Mihailović was captured by the partisans and charged with treason and collaboration with the Germans by the Yugoslav government. He was executed in Belgrade in 1946.

The Yugoslav partisans were probably the most effective resistance movement against the Axis Powers during the war, and largely succeeded in driving the German forces out and taking over much of the former Yugoslavia by early 1945. One of the reasons for their success was their inclusion of all ethnic groups within Yugoslavia, but the price the people paid was high: estimates of those killed during the war run from 1 million upwards. This meant Yugoslavia was one of the countries that suffered most, per capita, of all the nations who fought the Nazis. The country paid a terrible price under occupation and liberation, particularly when internal tensions surfaced to cause so many of the deaths and suffering. What is worth noting, in view of what happened later, is that the first Yugoslav state was certainly undermined by its own internal squabbles. These were a result of ethnic tensions, but the principal cause of its suffering was foreign invasion and occupation.



▲ The Axis occupation of Yugoslavia., 1941–45



▲ Josip Tito and General Popovitch, who became foreign minister in Yugoslavia after the war, in 1943

The idea of a Balkan federation began to take root once more but the defeat of the Axis Powers was to leave a political vacuum, which both the Soviets and pro-Western democracies sought to fill. The surrender of Italy, and thus of Albania, in 1943 meant that Kosovo became a pawn once more of larger interests. Kosovo was liberated in 1944 with the help of Albanian partisans together with the communists and, in February 1945, the province was formally annexed to Serbia, becoming an “autonomous region”. Inside Albania, the resistance leader, Enver Hoxha became first secretary of the Communist Party and he was to rule the country as its dictator until his death in 1985. Hoxha, was one of the toughest and most uncompromising of the communist strongmen in the 20th century. He followed the precept that “the religion of Albania is Albanianism” and was, in essence, to isolate his country and its regime from the eyes of the world in the years that followed the end of the Second World War, establishing a cult of personality that was one of the most bizarre within Europe.

Source skills

Source A

A speech by Josip Broz Tito made on 29 November 1943 in Belgrade.

We are very well aware that the traitor-government is doing all it can to smuggle itself back into Yugoslavia at any cost (and that goes for the king too) before the people utter their decisive word on their future. We know that certain reactionary circles abroad are helping that government. But we also know that the vast majority of progressive democratic elements in the Allied countries sincerely desire our people to decide their future for themselves ...

We have been slandered from all sides ... All the occupiers and traitors ... say that our people's liberation struggle in Yugoslavia is purely a communist affair, involving the bolshevisation of a country, an attempt by the communists to seize power, the abolition of private property, the destruction of the church and of religion, the destruction of culture and so on ... Very few people believe these lies any longer, and least of all the people of Yugoslavia ... The times are past when a handful of reactionaries could ascribe such

matters to the communists of Yugoslavia, in order to isolate them from the people. Bearing this in mind ... It is essential to take steps to ensure that our peoples obtain a state system based on the brotherhood and equality of rights of all peoples of Yugoslavia and which would guarantee genuine liberty and democracy to all sections of the community. The monarchy has completely discredited itself in the eyes of the people during the last twenty-three years. The evidence for this has been proved hundreds of thousands of times and all our peoples know it. Only a republican form of government can ensure that such disasters never again come upon our people.

Source B

A speech by Josip Broz Tito made on 14 February 1945 in Belgrade.

Our sacrifices are terrible. I can safely say that there is no other part of the world which has been devastated on a vaster scale than Yugoslavia. Every tenth Yugoslav has perished in this struggle in which we were forced to wrest armaments from our enemies, to freeze without clothing, and to die without medication.