

Edward Grey And The First Balkan War

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ABSTRACT

The First Balkan War was one of the most important events in the modern political history of the South-Eastern Europe. On the one hand it remarked completion of the centuries national liberation struggle of the members of the Balkan Alliance (Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro) and leaving of the Balkans territories from the Ottoman Empire on the other hand. After a few weeks of the intensive fighting there was an armistice, and after that was starting Peace conference of the Balkan Allies and ambassadors conference of the Great Powers in London.

One of the most eminent protagonist of the First Balkan War and creator of the London Peace conference was Edward Grey, British Foreign Secretary. He was convinced pacifist, and firmly believed that war is immoral and irrational meaning of the foreign policy, and that First Balkan war should be terminated as soon as possible. Grey considered that there is danger of the spreading of the war fire in the wider European war between Triple Alliance and the Central Powers. All participants of the London Peace Conference claimed that Edward Grey was master of neutrality and impartiality.

Key words: *Edward Grey, The First Balkan War, Balkan allies, Turkey, Great Britain, Serbia*

The First Balkan War represented one of the most important events in modern political history of Southeast Europe, because on one hand, it marked the end of centuries of national liberation struggle of the member states of the Balkan League (Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, Greece), and on the other hand, abandonment of the Balkan territories by the Ottoman Empire. After several weeks of armed struggle there came to a truce, and then a peace conference of Balkan allies and Turkey was held, as well as the Conference of Ambassadors of the Great Powers in London.

One of the main protagonists of the First Balkan War and makers of the peace conference was Edward Grey, the British foreign minister who is belonged for the success of negotiations. Edward Grey, as a convinced peacekeeper, had his starting viewpoint in the premise that armed conflicts were an immoral means in the conduct of foreign policy and resolution of political and territorial problems of conflicting peoples and nations, and that the First Balkan War had to end as quickly as possible. He believed that there was danger that the war of the members of the Balkan League and Turkey could turn into a great European conflict over competing interests of the members of the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente. The main objective of this paper is to highlight the role of the head of the Foreign Office in the First Balkan War, and demonstrate his efforts to end the war as soon as possible and resolve territorial problems in a peaceful way, achieving the necessary compromise between the warring sides.

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The First Balkan War began on October 8th, 1912, when Montenegro was the first among the Balkan allies to declare war with Turkey, while Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria entered the war on October 18th. Officially, the reason for the war was to compel Turkey to implement reforms in the areas of its European and Balkan allies to obtain autonomy of the individual Ottoman estates in Europe.¹ However, fundamentally, intention of the members of the Balkan alliance was to end the Turkish rule in the Balkans and liberate their compatriots from that centuries-long rule.² There is an interesting evaluation, given by Arthur Nicolson, British Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs, of the causes of outbreak of the First Balkan War, expressed in a private letter to Lord Charles Hardinge on October 9th 1912. Nicolson thought that the main cause of the war was a wish of Russia to realize its hopes and aspirations in that region using four Balkan countries. In this sense, it encouraged conclusion of a secret alliance between the Balkan states. Arthur Nicholson assumed that the Russian foreign minister, Sergey Sazonov, had in mind primarily the desire to achieve diplomatic success over Austria and then to restore Russian prestige in the Balkans. He saw other reasons that led to the Balkan conflicts in the problems in which Turkey found itself at the time, which included the local administration, the Albanian uprising war with Italy. Otherwise, Arthur Nicolson was known for his strong Russophile sentiments. Its extreme pro-Russian orientation impaired his position in the Foreign Office which was particularly evident during the Balkan wars when he fell out with Edward Grey. Nicolson thought that Turkish collapse could only be temporarily delayed, and that Russian advantage in Southeast Europe cannot be blocked.³

With the outbreak of the First Balkan War, the state of status quo, which had been jealously guarded by the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Russia for several decades, ceased to exist, and the victory of the Balkan allies broke illusions about the possibility that Turkey could continue to keep its estates in the Balkan Peninsula under control. Edward Grey himself admitted in his memoirs that annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina was the first violation of the status quo of Turkey, Italian war shook the status, and the Balkan Alliance destroyed it.⁴ Great Powers were very surprised by the fact that the Balkan allies succeeded to achieve victory over the Turkish army in such a short time, considering that they were convinced that their mutual animosity was stronger than their readiness to enter into conflict with Turkey, that their armies were poorly trained and

¹ М. Војводић, Разграничење Србије и Црне Горе с Албанијом 1912-1913. године, Историјски часопис XXXVI (1989), Београд 1989, 149; Ibid, Прилике на Косову и Метохији и политика Србије 1881-1912. године, Историјски часопис књ. XXXVIII (1991), Београд 1992, 188; Ibid, Националне тежње и захтеви Србије у балканским ратовима, Историјски гласник, 1-2, Београд 1995, 73; Ј. Цвијић, Балкански рат и Србија, Београд 1912, 8-9.

² М. Војводић, Прилике на Косову и Метохији, 188; R. C. K. Ensor, England 1870-1914, Oxford 1949, 464.

³ Z. Steiner, The Foreign Office and Foreign Policy 1898-1914, Cambridge 1969, 97, 134-135.

⁴ Grey of Fallodon Viscount, Twenty-Five Years 1892-1916, I-II, London 1925, 260.

their weapons were bad. They believed that the Balkan alliance was to be defeated by Turkey soon after start of hostilities.⁵

The New reality imposed the need to pursue a new policy whose spiritus movens was Edward Grey, an experienced British diplomat and the head of the Foreign Office. He himself was in a dilemma of what to do first and how to meet demands of the Balkan allies for territorial changes on the one hand, but, in accordance with traditional British policy of defending the status quo, how not to allow Turkey to be completely devoid of its European possessions after the military victory of the Balkan countries on the other hand. Therefore, in the initial phase of the First Balkan War, he only formally supports the territorial aspirations of the Balkan allies, especially Serbia, and does everything in his power to restrain those requests as much as possible and reduce them to a minimum.

However, in a report sent on November 1st 1912, to Rennell Rodd, a British ambassador in Rome, Edward Grey says that it is currently a very topical issue whether Balkan allies should be allowed to retain the territories they taken in possessions after the victory over the Turks, or whether a limit should be introduced to limit the size of territories they can keep. This report find out that Grey, under the pressure of public opinion that favoured the Balkan allies, began to change his hard position in favour of recognition of need for territorial re-composition of the Balkans. In this sense, his words that "public opinion here (referring to the United Kingdom, the author's note) is not reserved and it would be against attempts to deprive the Balkan states of fruits of their victory" are symptomatic.⁶

However, negative attitude of Vienna towards territorial demands coming from the Balkan capitals, especially from Belgrade, and at the cost of a new Europe-wide war, forced Grey as a real-politician that originally gave encouragement to Serbia and other Balkan states in respect of large territorial changes, to bring that encouragement to a minimum. The British foreign minister was aware that the issue of ports on the Adriatic, which was an essential question for Serbia and its economic independence and a matter of life and death, was a source of difficulty with Austria. However, at the same time he thought that a satisfactory solution could be achieved by reconciliation of Serbian claims (in which he used the word "natural demand" for independent economic access to the sea) with Austrian interests. For him it already meant that Serbia should accept the compromise in order to achieve a peaceful solution which was presented to Sazonov who agreed.⁷

The most authentic evidence that there was a change in the attitudes of British officials towards the demands of Serbia and other Balkan countries might be the report of

⁵ A. J. Grant and H. Temperley, *Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (1789-1939)*, London 1936, 473.

⁶ *British Documents on the Origins of the War 1898-1914*, edited by G. P. Gooch and H. Temperley, vol. IX *The Balkan Wars, part II The League and Turkey*, London 1934, N° 467, E. Grey to R. Rodd, November 1, 1912, 72. (further B. D.).

⁷ B. D., vol. IX, part II, N° 145, E. Grey, to G. Buchanan, November 7, 1912, 110; B. D., vol. IX, part II, N° 171, G. Buchanan to E. Grey, November 9, 1912, 127.

Milenko Vesnić, Serbian delegate at the London Peace Conference, addressed to Nikola Pašić on March 29th 1913. He pointed out on that occasion that it had been for more than a month that the British government had been changing its attitude to the events in the Balkans. From nakedly open and favourable attitude to the Balkan peoples, it moved to the reserved one and some attention was paid to Turkey. While Grey at the beginning did not want to receive Hakki Pasha, who was said to be the person with no qualifications to negotiate on behalf of Turkey, he later arranged his audience with the king, and then he himself met him.

Grey showed his mastery of diplomatic balancing during the London Peace Conference, which marked the beginning of backstage diplomatic games, behind which were conflicting interests of the great powers that had temporarily buried their own "hatchets" accepting European concept as a mode of diplomatic activity. Creator of that concept on the Balkans in 1912 was Grey himself who, through this form of diplomatic appearance realized his principle that the war was an immoral and irrational foreign policy tool and thought that potential armed conflict between the two opposing blocks of the great powers should be prevented, especially between Austria and Russia⁸, pointing out the need to avoid conflicts within the Triple Entente. Grey disdained possibilities of a wider European war and British involvement in it because he assessed that its possibilities and advantages were minimal.⁹ According to Prince Karl von Lichnowsky, the German Minister in London, Edward Grey's program was meant to reach the settlement of disagreements between Germany and Great Britain, and to ensure peace by signing a number of agreements between the two blocks of power, with the motto "bring both groups together," or as professor George Gooch argued, it was important that Britain and Germany acted "hand in hand" before Europe.¹⁰ Advocating prevention of the outbreak of conflicts between these two blocks of powers, Edward Grey acted as an outstanding pacifist.¹¹ The essence of European concept from 1912, the intention of the great powers was to localize and end the Balkan conflicts as soon as possible through mutual agreements and understanding. The pillar of the concept were Germany and Great Britain, which at the time had no direct political interests in the Balkans. Germany, for its part should constrain the extreme demands of its allies, especially Austria, and London had an obligation to calm Russian ambitions and using the influence of St. Petersburg on the Balkan allies, especially on Serbia, to reduce their claims.¹² Therefore, Russia was supposed to be a corrective factor of Serbia and its allies. During the peace conference,

⁸ Д. Ђорђевић, Излазак Србије на Јадранско море и Конференција амбасадора у Лондону 1912, Београд 1956, 41; А. Ј. Р. Тајлор, *The Trouble Makers. Dissent over Foreign Policy 1792-1939*, Лондон 1969, 114.

⁹ J. Charmley, *Splendid Isolation? Britain and Balance of Power 1874-1914*, London 1999, 338.

¹⁰ Кнез Лихновски, Моје послаништво у Лондону (1912-1914), Солун 1918, 6.

¹¹ В. Е. Шмитт, Triple Alliance and Triple Entente, 1902-1914, *The American Historical Review*, vol. XXIX, № 3, april 1924, 465.

¹² R. J. Cramton, *The Decline of Europe in the Balkans 1913-1914*, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. LII, № 128, July 1974, Cambridge 1974, 393.

sixty three official meetings were held, but most of the decisions were made in personal contacts of diplomatic representatives of the great powers who were working behind the scenes.

The hero and the creator of the peace conference was Edward Grey, who also has the credit for success of the negotiations.¹³ All the conference participants agreed that Grey was able to achieve neutrality and he earned their trust as an impartial person.¹⁴ Otherwise, he is remembered as head of the Foreign Office with the longest employment status. Many historians have written about him and evaluated his personality. According to Zara Steiner, Grey was a cunning, loyal and honest person, but the most isolated head of the Foreign Office who did not like to travel. He did not have the capacity for diplomatic maneuvers as Salisbury. He had in him a bit of Gladstone's moral seriousness, but he simultaneously showed both his strength and weakness, stubbornness and openness to the opinions of others, rigidity and flexibility.¹⁵ Yet, Zara Steiner's conclusion was that it was under the direction of Edward Grey that the Foreign Office reached the peak of its pre-war reputation.¹⁶ His foreign policy principles were avoiding the isolation of the British Empire and resolving its issues with Russia. The common thread that linked these two principles was his fear of isolation and of Russia, which led to Great Britain losing its most important diplomatic value, freedom of action.¹⁷

Otherwise, the Conference of ambassadors of the great powers in the London stood out from the previous meetings of this kind. Grey conception that the conference should not have the protocol and the secretary was dominant, the meetings began at four o'clock in the afternoon with a break for compulsory English tea at five, and then the exchange of views resumed for one hour more. Meetings were chaired by Edward Grey, who spoke English as his knowledge of French was poor.¹⁸ His skill was reflected in the fact that he presided over a conference in a wise, calm and tactful manner.¹⁹ Convening and holding the London conference seemed a major boon for peace because many radical demands were mitigated and there was a prevailing belief that issues could be solved through negotiations, not just in war.²⁰

His preference for negotiation, compromise and finding almost unbelievable diplomatic solutions, showed in the example of Serbian demands for territorial access to

¹³ L. Albertini, *The Origins of the War 1914*, vol. 1: *European Relations from the Congress of Berlin to the Eve of Sarajevo Murder 1878-1914*, London 1952, 423.

¹⁴ E. C. Helmerich, *The Diplomacy of the Balkan Wars 1912-1913*, Cambridge 1938, 251; Кнез Лихновски, *op. cit.*, 13.

¹⁵ Z. Steiner, *op. cit.*, 83, 85-88.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, *The Foreign Office under Sir Edward Grey, 1905-1914*, 22, *Britain Foreign Policy under Sir Edward Grey*, ed. by F. H. Hinsley, Cambridge 1977.

¹⁷ K. M. Wilson, *British Foreign Secretaries and Foreign Policy: From Crimean War to First World War*, London 1987, 172.

¹⁸ Д. Ђорђевић, *Изразак Србије на Јадранско море*, 131.

¹⁹ R. C. K. Ensor, *op. cit.*, 466; Кнез Лихновски, *op. cit.*, 14.

²⁰ В. Ђоровић, *Односи између Србије и Аустро-Угарске*, 454; Д. Ђорђевић, *Изразак Србије на Јадранско море*, 149.

the sea and getting a few cities to the border with the newly formed Albanian state. Although at the beginning he supported Serbian request for access to the sea, he gradually changed his view due to tremendous resistance of Austria to allow Serbia to get one port on the Adriatic coast and access to the sea. In frequent conversations with Serbian diplomats in London, he had a very skillful way of telling them that he was personally aware of how important it was for Serbia to provide commercial access to the sea, but that there were different ways to achieve that goal. If it insisted only on its terms and dismissed talks about other ways, there was a danger of losing the support of those who wanted to help it. If it, however, provoked a conflict with Austria, that would impede and impair the achievement of the final agreement.²¹ And when it almost looked as if the whole thing had been lost due to the stubborn resistance to a compromise solution on the issue of Serbia's access to the sea, supported by the Serbian Prime Minister Nikola Pasić, Grey again impressed the participants of the peace conference with his diplomatic skill. He used the tactic that he applied during the annexation crisis, to obtain Serbian consent to the solution that was offered, through Russia. Sazonov indeed used his influence on Belgrade assuring the Serbian government that it was important to soften its position, which was accepted, expressing willingness to leave the decision of its access to the sea to the great powers.²² In the middle of December 1912, Nikola Pasic sent instructions to Serbian delegates at the conference that if "you get convinced that it was difficult for Serbia to get access to the sea and there was danger that despite the Turkish approval, Austria was against that proposal, you need to strive to keep naval Albania to Turkey, but that it recognizes better Serbian border in return." Thus it would avoid a dispute with Austria and transfer it to Turkey.

Thanks to efforts of Edward Grey, the problem of Serbian access to the Adriatic Sea was solved finding a compromised formula that essentially was neither enforceable nor was it ever realized. According to the adopted solution Serbia was supposed to get a trade access to the sea by international railway through a free and neutral port. This solution was made by great powers at the first plenary session of the conference of ambassadors of the great powers on December 17th 1912 when the decision on formation of an autonomous Albanian state was also made and when it was generally agreed on its borders with Montenegro to the north and Greece to the south.²³ This shattered the illusion of Serbian territorial exit to the Adriatic Sea, and what Grey had previously proposed to Sazonov was realized.

Grey showed his diplomatic capability in addressing the Serbian request to obtain several towns near the Albanian border (Peć, Prizren, Debar, Djakovica). Pasić, after losing the battle over access to the sea, shifted all his political power to get better borders with Albania. As an experienced diplomat Gray persuaded Serbian colleagues that the

²¹ B. D., vol. IX, part II, N° 190. E. Grey to R. Paget, November 13, 1912, 145; B. D., vol. IX, part II, N° 193, E. Grey to F. Cartwright, November 13, 1912, 147.

²² B. D., vol. IX, part II, N° 371, G. Buchanan to E. Grey, December 11, 1912, 275-276.

²³ B. D., vol. IX, part II, N° 391, E. Grey to F. Cartwright, December 17, 1912, 292-293.

solution of eastern borders of Albania would not be so unfavorable, that is, that they would not be determined at the expense of Serbia, as it was commonly thought.²⁴ So in this case he did everything to reassure the Serbian side and find a compromise that would satisfy both Austria as a protector of the newly created state of Albania and Serbia. Although he was in favour of the compromise proposal to meet Serbian requests regarding the eastern Albanian border, he, however, did not want to risk war. In this sense, he sent a message to Belgrade on February 12th 1913 saying that the Serbian public forgets that the Serbs had already secured significant points: Sandzak of Novi Pazar, most of Macedonia, Prizren and Peć. He assured Serbia that Britain would continue to provide it with diplomatic support, but if it became apparent that Djakovica and Debar could not be secured except by force, the British government would not go to war because of these two towns. He expressed understanding for Serbia's desire to win these the two cities as well, but thought that would be completely unreasonable to risk a conflict to obtain what had already been achieved. He also warned about the danger of the war with Austria that could jeopardize the very existence of Serbia and repeated that he was its friend.²⁵ Therefore, towns of Debar and Djakovica became the main stumbling block. Serbian hard attitude to these two towns made Grey use even many literary metaphors in order to persuade the Serbian side to give in. In a conversation with Milenko Vesnić, he figuratively described the absurd situation in which Serbia was, noting that "it would be the same as if a man who expected to enter a final estate committed suicide because he could not get one or two fields that remain out of the whole estate." This effectively meant that for him previously gained results were much more important than a stubborn looking for Djakovica and Debar. Grey again promised diplomatic assistance to Serbia, but also warned that he could not claim that he would succeed, and that would be suicide for Serbia if it made war with her powerful neighbour.²⁶ In further diplomatic outwitting Serbia won Peć, Prizren and Debar, and there was only disputed Djakovica, whose status was resolved thanks to, once again, diplomatic virtues of Edward Grey. Djakovica was ceded to Serbia for withdrawal of its army around Scutari. Russians once again put pressure on the Serbian government and in return received guarantees from Vienna that it would not object to Djakovica becoming a part of the Serbian state.

The role of Edward Grey in ending the First Balkan War, convening and holding a peace conference in London, repress territorial ambitions of the Balkan allies, but also suppression of humiliation of Turkey, preventing conflicts between the forces of the Triple Alliance and Triple Entente is not doubt. He showed in these events that he was a skilled, competent, wise diplomat for whom peace and compromise were far more important than war that he deeply despised. Thanks to his skills he was able to save

²⁴ АС, МИДС, ПО 1912, Ф-Х, А-VIII, Пов. бр. 5008,5030, С. Грујић-Н. Пашинћу, 27. XII 1912. / 9. I 1913; B. D., vol. IX, part II, N° 472, E. Grey to R. Paget, January 8, 1913, 376-377.

²⁵ B. D., vol. IX, part II, N° 610, E. Grey to C. Barclay, February 12, 1913, 493.

²⁶ B. D., vol. IX, part II, N° 641, E. Grey to R. Paget, February 20, 1913, 517-518; АС, МИДС, ПО, 1913, Ф-XII, А-II, Пов. бр. 648, С. Грујић- МИД-у, 8/21. II 1913.

Europe and the world from a global war at least for a time, a war that was potentially very probable. Indeed it can be reasonably argued that Edward Grey was one of the most important figures who marked the first Balkan War, and a key player at the London peace conference that followed the end of military operations.