

BOOK REVIEW

The wars of yesterday. The Balkan Wars and the emergence of modern military conflict, 1912–1913. *Ed. by K. Boeckh, & S. Rutar.* New York (2018).

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Published online: May 17, 2021

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The proceedings volume “The Wars of Yesterday. The Balkan Wars and the Emergence of Modern Military Conflict, 1912–1913” is the result of constructive dialogue among a range of scholars and experts concerning the history of South-Eastern Europe and Turkey at a conference which was held in October 2012 in Istanbul to commemorate the centenary of the outbreak of warfare in the Balkans. Since the methodological background of the conference and consequently of the proceedings was defined as new military history, the international team faced the task of going beyond the range of topics traditionally studied in the national historiographies of the countries involved in the Balkan Wars. In the Introduction, editors *Katrin Boeckh* and *Sabine Rutar* suggest that despite the controversy of this research area and different points of view on “how to study war and societies at war”, the focus on exploration of the socio-political and cultural contexts was justified owing to the relevance of the problems, and also because it represented a certain novelty of views for the various national schools of research (p. 5).

The book includes 15 articles and is divided into four sections. The first section contains writings by the editor of the volume and an essay by *Wolfgang Höpken* in which the author develops the idea of the obvious discrepancy manifested in the title of his article “‘Modern Wars’ and ‘Backward Societies’: The Balkan Wars in the History of Twentieth Century European Warfare”. The Balkan Wars, while considered to be the first modern military conflict, were nevertheless conducted by the “backward” states of South-Eastern Europe. Developing the ideas formulated by *Katrin Boeckh* and *Sabine Rutar*, the author comes to the conclusion that it is time to stop viewing or studying of the Balkan Wars as a unique phenomenon (in the negative sense) in European history. The unflattering perception of the Balkan Wars is largely based on stereotypes, some of which had emerged earlier, such as the definition of the region as a “powder keg”, and others related to the tragic events of the 1990s in the Balkans.

The second section, “Beyond the Balkans: Geopolitical and Diplomatic Aspects”, seems, at first sight, to be a necessary continuation of the conceptual framework that places the Balkan Wars into a wider European context. However, the contents of the submitted articles do not entirely correspond to the tagline of the section, as the methodology the authors have chosen is more traditional, although the novelty of the materials upon which the articles are based is definitely an advantage. In their essays, *Gül Tokay* and *Alma Hannig* provide insights into the

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diplomatic environment around the war-torn Balkan region, by using new sources and applying new methodology to the diplomatic history of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire. *Michael Hesselholt Clemmesen* examines the influence of the Balkan Wars on the preparation of the great powers and smaller neutral states for a global military conflict. It should be noted that these articles make it easier to understand the main content of the volume for non-experts on the Balkan Wars.

The content of the third section, “Armies, Soldiers, Irregulars”, deserves special attention. This section includes articles from each of the major belligerent countries of the Balkan Wars, with the exception of Montenegro. In addition to the main subject of research concerning the armed forces, the effect of war on national mobilisation is also discussed, lending support to the essay by *Wolfgang Höpken*. The Balkan Wars were not only the region’s first modern military conflict, but also its first shocking contact with modernity. The goals set by the governments of the warring countries for their hastily modernised armies and population did not match the organisational capabilities of the existing state institutions, meaning that the political establishments were sooner or later forced to resort to traditional mobilisation methods.

Mechanisms of mobilization are described most clearly in the article by *Spyridon Tsoutsoumpis*, who, by analysing letters written by officers on the frontline, came to the conclusion that the Megalidea and the thesis about the superiority of the Hellenic civilization over the societies of not only the main enemy, the Ottoman Empire, but also of their allies, undoubtedly helped to raise the combat spirit of the Greek army (p. 209). However, the question arises, to what extent did this enthusiasm emanating from the national elite touch the hearts of ordinary Greek soldiers? It seems possible that the answer to this question is contained in an article by *Alexey Timofeev* on Serbian Chetniks (p. 258). Such guerrilla formations, which proved effective during the war, could well be called a symbol of the Balkan Wars, since similar models for units of irregulars were represented by the Bulgarian Komitas and the Greek Andarts. *Mehmet Beşekçi*’s article on mobilization in the Ottoman Empire shows the clash between national and state interests using the example of non-Muslim recruits: they demonstrated low combat spirit or deserted from the battlefield. The author presents evidence that it was a common practice among the Serbs, Bulgarians, and Greeks from Ottoman Balkan territory to volunteer for the armies or militias of the Balkan states (p. 174). A comparative study by *Claudiu-Lucian Topor* demonstrates that the easy victory in 1913 of the Romanians over their eternal enemy, the Bulgarians, was quickly recorded in the Romanian national consciousness as a cause for special pride, and, by the same token, negatively affected the readiness of the army to enter the First World War in 1916 (pp. 238–249).

The fourth section is dedicated to civilians, the wounded and invalids. This topic is rarely explored in histories of the Balkans, as it is a controversial point in the national historiographies of the respective countries of the region. Therefore, it should be noted that the materials in this section are of particular value, because they not only demonstrate new methods in approaching social mobilisation and disability, but also call on the scholarly community to collectively resolve a number of fundamental research problems, such as the correlation of civic and ethnic identities under war conditions. In this regard, special attention should be paid to the sources and methodology of research. In a review article of this volume, *John Paul Newman* (University of Maynooth) criticised some authors for the arbitrary use of ego-documents. Moreover, he noted that the use of such subjective sources for the discussion of fundamental questions such as violence against representatives of another nation and religion, is incorrect in the context of



“new military history”.¹ It is hard to disagree with him, and yet it is important to highlight the positive aspects of the works in this volume.

The first example of this is the article by *Heike Karge* about war neurosis and mental injuries due to combat among the soldiers of the Balkan Wars. The author, exploring statistical data, comes to the conclusion that clinical psychiatry in Serbia and neighbouring Croatia-Slavonia after the Great War benefited significantly from the experience gained from treating Balkan War veterans (p. 406). A second example is by *Sabine Rutar*, who explores collective “pre-war neurosis” in a micro-historical study on the situatedness of identities under the threat of possible violence in the multi-ethnic milieu of the Social-Democrats in Trieste between 1912 and 1914. *Oya Dağlar Macar*’s paper demonstrates the “history of experience” which involvement in the Balkan Wars gave to medical staff from the British Red Cross who served in the Ottoman Empire. These works are more closely related to the methodological orientation of the volume – the authors’ statements of purpose and solutions offered for the problems in question draw attention to the problem of “war and society” and significantly enrich the histories of wars between states and establishments by combining them with the lives and deaths of particular individuals.

In this regard, the work of an international team of authors can have a positive impact on the study of an issue in general. In this particular case, the prevalence of traditional diplomatic history and the dominant national narratives of the countries involved in the war have hindered the evolution of research on regional history. Furthermore, the chronological proximity of the Balkan Wars to the First World War has had the effect of marginalising the region as a whole. The Balkan Wars have much left to be explored, but the methodological direction set by the editors made it possible to correct differences in the assessments of national traditions and correlate them with the understanding of the issue by researchers from outside of the region. It was possible mainly because the authors managed to go beyond their national perspectives to some extent, and they reflect the hybrid nature of the Balkan Wars, which combined the characteristics of a traditional local war and those of subsequent global conflicts. This collection of essays reveals less of the idea that the Balkan Wars were the first modern military conflict – at least the authors’ arguments on this point seem less convincing – than of the evidence confirming the “archaic” and “oriental” nature of the methods of warfare employed by the Balkan states. However, this is explained somewhat by the fact that the volume is the first attempt at examining the Balkan Wars from this perspective and plays an inspiring role for further research.

¹Newman J.P. *The Wars of Yesterday. The Balkan Wars and the Emergence of Modern Military Conflict, 1912–1913*. Ed. Katrin Boeckh, Sabine Rutar. New York, 2018. 438 pp. *Slavic Review*. Vol. 77. Is. 4. 2018. pp. 1041–1044.

