Did Wars Make Nation-States in the Balkans?: Nationalisms, Wars and States in the 19th and early 20th Century South East Europe

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Abstract Nationalism and protracted warfare are often seen as the most important impediments to social advancement in the Balkans. In contrast to these popular perceptions I argue that for much of its history the Balkan region was characterised by limited inter-state violence and by notable lack of nationalist ideologies. Furthermore by comparing the processes of state and nation formation and warfare in the South East Europe with those in the Western Europe the article aims to show that it is the weakness, not the strength, of nationalism and protracted warfare that historically have been the principal obstacles for social development. The general argument of the paper is developed in dialogue with Tilly’s theory that ties state formation to proliferation of wars and Gellner’s model that links the rise of nationalism to emergence of standardised educational systems and industrialisation. In an attempt to partially disprove Tilly and vindicate Gellner I argue that the experience of the Balkan region indicates that although wars can prove important catalysts of state formation they may not necessarily contribute to nation formation.

Introduction

In popular images the Balkan Peninsula is regularly associated with rampant nationalism and protracted warfare. This view harks back to the Ottoman times when this region was perceived as the epicentre of the violent confrontation with the Islamic Other, but the hegemony of the current stereotypical views of the Balkans was really established during the 19th century (Goldsworthy 1998; Todorova 1997, Bakić-Hayden and Hayden 1992). The Balkan wars of 1912–3 reinforced this image of the region as volatile, xenophobic and deeply steeped in inter-ethnic hate. One of the first in-depth analyses of the Balkan wars by Schurman (1914: 19–20) describes the Balkan nations as “undeveloped political communities... where elemental human nature has never been thoroughly disciplined and chastened in the school of peaceful political life” and

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who are “dominated by the uncontrolled instinct of national egoism and greed”. A similar discourse, that Todorova (1997) terms “Balkanism”, re-emerged at the end of 20th century depicting the region as the hotbed of “ancient hatreds”, unbridled violence and aggressive nationalism.

Nevertheless, leaving aside the crude ethnocentric imagery, such perceptions are grounded in profoundly mistaken assumptions since for much of its history this region was less violent and certainly less nationalist than its Western European counterpart. After the relatively intense period of medieval warfare between the Byzantine and various Slavic empires the Ottoman expansion and Habsburg consolidation made the area fairly stable for centuries. With few notable exceptions much of the region avoided protracted warfare throughout the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. It is only in the 19th and 20th centuries that organised violence started to escalate but even when one counts human casualties for all wars fought in the Balkans for these two centuries they remain quite small compared to war generated deaths in the rest of Europe. For example, whereas only twelve years of Napoleonic wars (1803–1815) resulted in more than six million dead throughout Europe, all the Balkan wars and uprisings of the whole of the 19th century amounted to less than 200,000 human casualties (out of which over 120,000 were the result of a single war – the Greek War of Independence (Clodfelter 1992:322–3; Eckhardt 1992). While in 1866 the seven weeks long Austro-Prussian war ended with more than 100,000 dead and the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 with close to 200,000 dead the three largest violent conflicts in the second half of the 19th century Balkans, the Serbo-Ottoman war (1876), the Serbo-Bulgarian war (1885) and the Greco-Ottoman war of 1897 combined resulted in less than 9000 human casualties (Clodfelter 1992; Eckhardt 1992).

Even the two Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913, which in the Western European and American media were depicted as the savage and brutal orgy of violence that involved an unprecedented, for the region, death toll of over 200,000 could not compare to the casualties of the American Civil war (1861–1865) with over 620,000 or the death tolls of the British or French colonial wars. Hence, if the organised violence in the Balkans was atypical in any respect it is its limited, rather than unconstrained, character that stands out.

Similarly, instead of being an omnipotent and prevalent discourse that determines the political actions of the majority of people in the Balkans nationalism was a latecomer to the region. Notwithstanding the conventional historical narratives that depict the establishment of independent polities in the South East Europe
in the 19th century as “national revolutions”, an overwhelming majority of the population, just as the most active participants in these uprisings, had little or no sense of what nationalism is. Rather than being a home grown invention nationalist ideology was imported slowly, and with a lot of resistance, from Paris, London, Berlin, Leipzig, Vienna and other centres of Enlightenment and Romanticism.

In contrast to the mainstream view that sees rampant nationalism and incessant warfare as the principal obstacles to social development in the Balkans I argue that it is the inherent weakness of nationalism and the chronic lack of protracted organised violence that have historically been the key impediments for political and economic growth. In particular the paper focuses on the relationship between warfare, state building and nation formation in the 19th and early 20th century Balkans. To fully articulate this argument I engage with Charles Tilly’s thesis that links war with state making and Ernest Gellner’s interpretation that ties nationalism to the educational systems and industrialisation. Although the Balkans are often seen as the Achilles heel of Gellner’s theory while fully vindicating Tilly’s argument I attempt to show otherwise. I contend that although Tilly’s argument seems able to deal with some aspects of state formation in the Balkans, as his theory devotes little attention to ideology and nationalism in particular, it cannot explain the persistent state weakness in the late 19th and early 20th century Balkans. To account for the different outcomes in the Balkans and Western Europe it is crucial to revisit Gellner’s theory of nationalism and to show that contrary to the standard criticisms this model can deal well with the dynamics of nation formation in the Balkans. In other words, this paper attempts to vindicate Gellner and to partially undermine Tilly by showing how and why wars did not create strong states and how and why there was little nationalism in the 19th century Balkans. The general argument is that although wars often make states they do not necessarily make nations. Instead it is the organisational and ideological power of states themselves that make nations and this happens more often in times of prolonged peace rather than in periods of intensive warfare (Malešević 2010:179–233).

The paper is in five parts. The first and second parts briefly summarise and critically analyse Tilly’s and Gellner’s arguments. The third and fourth parts explore the relationship between war and state building and the development of nationalism in the 19th and early 20th century Balkans. The final section discusses the findings in the context of the debate on the impact of warfare on state and nation formation.
1. War Making and State Making Outside of Western Europe

Many of the now-forgotten early sociologists such as Gumplovicz’s (1899), Franz Oppenheimer (1914) and Gustav Ratzenhofer (1881) have made persuasive analyses that link state making with organised violence. In their view the institution of the state was born in bloodshed: it was something that emerged through conquest and a long history of violent domination. This so-called conquest thesis was later refined by Otto Hintze (1975), and Max Weber (1978), among others, who saw organisational preparation for, and the conduct of warfare, as the decisive structural mechanisms of state building.

However, it was Charles Tilly (1975, 1985) who made this link between war and state creation explicit and who also provided a set of unambiguous empirical criteria for tracing causal links between the two phenomena. Tilly’s (1975:42) key point is that state making and war making are mutually constitutive: “war made the state, and the state made war”. More specifically he argues that modern, bureaucratic, centralised and territorialised nation-states have emerged as an unintended consequence of protracted warfare and expensive military campaigns. To pay for these costly wars the rulers of pre-modern polities were forced to dramatically increase resource extraction from the population under their control as well as to mobilize large sections of that population to fight in, work and pay for these wars. There were two principal corollaries of this structural change. On the one hand a greater extraction of resources stimulated the promotion of capital accumulation, the development of advanced and pervasive fiscal capacities of states, the society-wide expansion of legal systems, and the strengthening of communication and transport capabilities of states. On the other hand, the larger tax burden, universal conscription and greater labour obligations were countered by all-encompassing state protection, and the gradual extension of parliamentarianism and civil, political, and some social rights.

Focusing on the transformation of the European states from the 16th until the 20th centuries, Tilly (1992) argues that the steady increase in interstate warfare resulted in a greater geopolitical autonomy for state rulers. This was achieved in the context of a military revolution that brought about spectacular change in how wars were fought. The unprecedented advances in science and technology combined with the changing war ethics and new developments in military organisation made warfare much more destructive and expensive. The invention and mass production of new weapons, new modes of transport and communication and new fortifications allowed for the proliferation of mass armies.
In order to compete militarily with other rising powers the rulers had to neutralise internal threats and in this process pacify the domestic realm thus making the populations under their control dependent on their security for protection. In this ruthless struggle the smaller polities were swallowed by the larger ones and the European map saw a dramatic reduction in the number of independent polities: from as many as 1000 in the 14th century to slightly over 500 in 16th century and only 25 at the beginning of 20th century (Tilly 1975:15).

Protracted warfare launched a vicious cycle whereby rulers extracted more resources to fund wars leading directly towards greater repression in the form of higher and more encompassing taxation, more severe military conscription and increased reliance on bank loans and debts, all of which stimulated further state building. To finance wars, the rulers, often unwillingly, increased the infrastructural power of states (Mann 1986) which was most clearly visible in the tighter centralisation of rule, the expansion of the civil service, tax-coll ecting agencies, exchequers, police forces and judicial systems. As state power grew it threatened the security of other states with most of them embarking on preventive wars thus perpetuating the vicious cycle whereby war-making leads to state building and state-building leads to more war-making.

Although Tilly’s argument is geographically and historically specific as it focuses on the Western European experience over the past four centuries there were many attempts to test this model on other continents, world regions, and individual nation-states as well as in other historical periods. For example, Herbst (1990, 2000) demonstrates how a combination of geographical, demographic and political factors made much of Africa indolent for state building. In contrast to Europe, where land was scarce and population density high, sub-Saharan Africa was sparsely populated which made rulers focus on the acquisition of people rather than land. Consequently, the lack of territorial disputes and enduring external threats made state building slow and, from the point of view of the rulers, an unnecessary activity. The direct by-product of these policies has been evident since the early years of post-colonialism: the lack of protracted inter-state warfare and the proliferation of civil wars fostered the development of politically authoritarian, economically impoverished and ethnically heterogeneous states.

In a similar vein Centeno (2002, 1997) compares the European with the Central and South American experience of war and state making emphasising stark differences between the two regions. He argues that in contrast to Western Europe where wars were
intensive resulting in the tighter centralisation of authority, greater fiscal control over clearly demarcated territories and eventually fuller cultural homogenisation of national populations, the Latin and Central American polities fought limited and largely ineffective wars, resulting in weak, highly stratified, economically frail and internally culturally polarised states. Just as in Africa, much of South and Central American warfare was inter-state rather than intra-state: local uprisings, coups, civil wars and revolutions. As Centeno (2002) points out, for much of the 19th and early 20th century South and Central American polities were more akin to city-states in charge of mini empires than proper nation-states. Unlike Europe where the rulers were able to utilise protracted wars to centralise and monopolise their authority over specific territory the Latin American militaries retained a high degree of autonomy and little sense of loyalty to state authorities.

The recent studies in this vein have almost exclusively focused on the role of warfare in the developing world. Most of these works espouse two contrasting interpretations. Some, such as Ayoob (1995) and Thies (2006, 2007), follow Tilly’s original proposition and argue that interstate rivalry and conflicts in Africa, Middle East, Asia and Latin America enhance the extractive capacity of state apparatuses which in the long term are seen as developing similarly to the early modern European state formation model. In contrast, Reno (2003), Leander (2004) and Sorenson (2001) emphasise the different historical context and the different character of warfare in early modern Europe and the contemporary developing world. The argument is that the new international environment which guarantees the protection of state sovereignty and fixed borders is more conducive to intra-state, rather than inter-state, warfare. Consequently, instead of strengthening state building the proliferation of civil wars proves highly destructive for state development.

Nevertheless, what is peculiar in most attempts to apply Tilly’s argument outside of early modern Western Europe is an overwhelming focus on wars that have proved to be destructive to social development. That is, when researchers try to disprove Tilly they generally tend to focus on the regions where the patterns of warfare display very different characteristics to those of early modern Europe and where such wars generally have proven highly detrimental to state building. For example, both Centeno and Herbst, emphasise how different the relationship between war and state formation was in Africa and Latin America. All of these studies single out either the limited character of inter-state warfare or the prevalence of intra-state wars, both of which are interpreted as harmful to state development. Nevertheless, the fact that much of
the post-colonial experience is different to state building in early modern Europe does not really falsify Tilly’s original argument. If one recognises that the different structural conditions in Africa, Latin America and elsewhere have generated different forms of warfare and that such wars have produced different outcomes than the one in early modern Europe these findings can not disprove a thesis that links state building with protracted inter-state wars. In other words, to test Tilly’s argument it is essential to look at cases where structural conditions were similar but the outcome was very different: there is a need to focus on “winning” wars that did not result in the development of strong states. A number of such cases exist but the late 19th and early 20th century Balkan warfare in general is much better testing ground for Tilly’s model. However, before we take a closer look at the relationship between war and state making in the Balkans it is necessary to address the issue of nation formation too.

2. Nationalism without Industrialisation?

Since Tilly (1975) sees nations as a largely unintended by-product of state building, a historical construct that remains ultimately dependent on state formation, he does not devote much attention to the birth and expansion of nationalism. In contrast, in Ernest Gellner’s (1964:114, 1983:22, 1997:25) works nationalism is identified as one of the two central pillars of modernity (the other being continuous economic growth). For Gellner nationalism is a contingent but sociologically necessary phenomenon linked to the structural changes associated with the transition from the agrarian to the industrial world. More specifically he argues that there is no room for nationalist ideology before modernity as the pre-industrial world consisted of essentially status based polities where culture, rather than being a means of cultural, horizontal, homogenisation, was an instrument of vertical differentiation: the “high culture” of warrior nobility and high priesthood was rigidly opposed to the multitude of “low” vernacular cultures of peasantry. In such a world there was little social and geographical mobility as neither aristocrats nor peasantry had any interest or sense of loyalty beyond one’s kinship, manor or estate.

In contrast, the industrial world is dynamic, fluid and entails a greater division of labour; it requires much greater cultural homogeneity as the nature of work changes dramatically. Gellner (1998:27) explains that in the industrial world “work has ceased to be physical and has become semantic. It consists not of the modification of things, but in the manipulation of meanings and people”. Since industrial society is vibrant and centred on “perpetual
growth” it has to be flexible and occupationally mobile. In this sense the industrial world becomes more egalitarian as the continuous development entails meritocracy and a high level of technical expertise. Consequently, in such a world universal literacy becomes a norm as most individuals have to be “mobile, and ready to shift from one activity to another, and must possess the generic training which enables them to follow the manuals and instructions of the new activity or occupation” (Gellner 1983:35).

In other words, modernity generates a “modular man”, a highly flexible creature able to operate in a constantly changing social environment. Furthermore, since the industrial order involves great geographical mobility, as many individuals migrate to urban centres in search for work where they have to communicate with thousands of other unknown individuals, there is a need for a single, standardised, mutually understandable idiom of communication. Hence, the existence and expansion of industry entails the presence of a large, state sponsored and academy supervised educational system. On the one hand the educational system generates a regular “supply” of literate, trained and skilled labour, on the other hand it moulds illiterate peasants versed in mutually unintelligible vernaculars into the fluent speakers of standardised, context free, national languages. The unintended consequence of this process is the fact that the modern educational system fosters strong nationalist identifications: “an educational system must operate in some medium, and some language (both in the literal and the extended sense): and the language it employs will stamp its products...Men do not in general become nationalists from sentiment or sentimentality, atavistic or not, well based or myth-founded: they become nationalists though genuine, objective, practical necessity...” (Gellner 1964: 160). Once monopoly on the educational system is fully established a nationalist ideology becomes a cornerstone of a state’s legitimacy. In the industrial age all culture becomes “high culture” and the vertical cultural divide is replaced by the horizontal cultural divide: instead of identifying with one’s village or one’s strata an overwhelming majority of people see themselves first and foremost as members of distinct nations. Therefore, for Gellner, there is no nationalism before industrialisation and literacy and no “marriage of culture and state” without an effective and sustainable educational system.

Although often recognised as an important and most original theory of nationalism (Nairn 1981:96, Smith 1983:109) Gellner’s account has been regularly criticised for its economistic reductionism, functionalist explanations, cultural essentialism, overly instrumentalist understanding of social action, Eurocentrism and

Most attempts to rescue Gellner’s argument have focused on identifying special circumstances for the Balkans (and Latin America). Thus Gellner himself (1997:41–43) attempts to explain the Greek war of independence by invoking the religious divide between Christian peasantry and its Muslim overlords and links this with the diffusion of Romanticism and Enlightenment which allegedly made Balkan rebels into “ideological bandits: in other words nationalists”. Similarly, Mouzelis (1998:160; 2007:132–135) understands industrialisation in much wider terms and re-conceptualises Gellner’s model through the notion of “modernisation”: “the elective affinity that Gellner tries to establish is not between nationalism and industrialisation, but between nationalism and modernity” (Mouzelis 1998:160).

However, here too, just as in the case of Tilly, the empirical criticism is built on the poor foundation. Instead of looking at the character of nation formation (the dependent variable), the critics, as well as the defenders (including Gellner himself), have focused almost exclusively on the independent variable – industrialisation/ modernisation. Nevertheless, to properly understand the social change in the Balkans one cannot take the nationalist historiography at face value and simply assume the widespread presence of nationalism in the 19th century. In other words, while there is no dispute that the 19th century Balkan peninsula was for the most part a long way off from reaching the industrial stage of development, the central question is whether the revolutions and wars of
independence of the early 19th century were principally motivated by specific nationalist goals. I argue that not only is there no empirical evidence that the nationalist ideology played any substantial role in the early 19th century Balkan revolutions and wars but also that nationalism remained a marginal phenomenon in the South East Europe for much of the 19th and early 20th century. In what follows, I attempt to show that although Tilly’s model seems able to explain the weakness of state formation in the early 19th century Balkans this theory falters in the context of late 19th and early 20th century warfare. Hence, to fully understand the logic of state building in the Balkans it is necessary to integrate segments of Tilly’s model with Gellner’s theory of nationalism. In other words, to account for the inherent infrastructural weakness of states in the Balkans one has to tackle the relationship between the state and nation formation.

3. Warfare and State Development

Despite the popular perceptions of Balkan wars as being frequent, protracted, excessive and highly destructive this region is no more prone to organised violence than other parts of Europe. In fact, when compared to the Western half of the continent, the 19th century Balkans seemed rather peaceful. For example, while the British Empire was involved in war for nearly all of the 19th century, including over sixty large scale violent conflicts, the Balkan states took part in only seven wars during the same period (Clodfelter 1992). Moreover, with the partial exception of the Greek war of independence (1821–29), all of these wars were small scale conflicts resulting in relatively limited destruction of property and comparatively low human casualties.

However, this is not to say that Tilly’s argument about war making states does not apply in this instance. On the contrary, the fact that both state building and warfare were fairly limited for much of the 19th century in the Balkans gives credence to the position that links increased state capacity to war proliferation. Nevertheless, as most Balkan states started from an extremely low organisational basis, state building was a rather complex and initially quite sluggish process. For example, at the end of the First Serbian Uprising (1804–1813), the entire administrative apparatus of the Serbian semi-autonomous polity consisted of only 24 civil servants (Stokes 1975:4; Roudometof 2001:113). In this, Serbia was not an exception but rather representative of other parts of the Ottoman Empire which, as a whole, until the 19th century possessed only a tiny bureaucracy: at the end of the 19th century the Ottoman capital, Constantinople, had only 869 clerks (Findley
Likewise, in the beginning of the 19th century the 1.5–2.3 million people of the Dunabian Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia were administered by only 1000 office-holding boyars (Pavlowitch 1999:31).

The infrastructure of the Balkan region was extremely poor: in Greece until 1832 “no road was practicable by cart” and until 1852 “only 168 kilometres of roads were built”; in Serbia even in 1858 there were only 800 km of paved roads and much of transport relied on horse or ox drawn carts. Similarly, Bulgarian roads were so impracticable that traders with large cargos had to wait outside of the towns for over 48 hours “because the road was too narrow to allow travel in double file” (Stoianovich 1994: 84–5). As Stoianovich (1994:81) emphasises, the Austrian port city Trieste had a cart capacity more than thirty three times and per capita more than three hundred times, as great as that of the entire Serbian polity.

Highly mountainous regions such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania had even worse transport and infrastructural capacity with Albania having not a single track of railway until 1947 (Stoianovich1994: 106).

Political independence did not automatically translate to economic development or industrial growth. No Balkan state had a national bank until the mid 19th century (Greece in 1841; Serbia only in 1870s and 80s) or proper industrial base. For example, Serbia had only one factory in 1847 and even in 1888 there were only 12 factories out of which 7 were breweries. For much of the first half of the 19th century exports from the Balkans were abysmal and the result of independence was a decline of traditional commercial urban sectors in favour of the administrative capitals of the new states (Stoianovich 1994:101; 214–16; Roudometof 2001: 160). Balkan cities remained very small and lacking in infrastructural capacities. For example, even in 1874 there was only one town in Serbia with a population of more than 25,000 and only four more with 5000 inhabitants and until 1850 no independent Balkan state had a city with over 100,000 inhabitants (Stoianovich 1994:101).

For most of the early and mid 19th century these cities and towns had no proper illumination, public squares, straight and wide streets, theatres, museums, or public clocks. Even in 1867 there was no public clock1 in the whole of Montenegro (Stoianovich 1994:252).

In the military sphere this underdevelopment was pronounced with a complete lack of professional armies. Both Serbian and Greek wars of independence were fought by units composed of banditry (hajduks, armatoloi, klephts and pirates), foreign trained volunteers (ex-officers and soldiers of the Habsburg, Russian, French and British militaries) and local notables many of which...
had little or no military experience. Not only were such military units small (i.e. the First Serbian Uprising included combined arm forces of between 20–30,000 men, Glenny 2000:12), disorganised and highly undisciplined but both local prelates and bandits were for the most part motivated by opportunistic goals and would easily switch sides and join the Ottomans if presented with a better opportunity. As Roudometof (2001: 26) and Pavlowitch (1999: 36) argue and document, most klephts and hajduks were very motivated by economic gain and fear of local ayans: “there was no strong desire to join the revolution and their participation was sometimes coerced” and “Klephts preyed on both Christians and Muslims”. Similarly most peasants were not interested in political participation and were “diffident towards any form of power” (Pavlowitch 1999:29).

Furthermore, these “armies” were highly decentralised and loyal only to their local commanders: “Karadjordje’s soldiers... were made up of hundreds of small bands, herded together by the hajduci and the knezes... many [soldiers] regarded battles as moonlighting, a means of enriching themselves...” (Glenny 2000:12).

Consequently, much of 19th century Balkan warfare was sporadic and small scale, thus, following Tilly’s argument, generating little increase in state capacity to extract material, people and money. In other words, the low organisational basis did not allow for efficient war making and, in turn, the absence of large scale, protracted warfare meant rulers’ inability to neutralise their domestic rivals or acquire enhanced organisational means for extraction of wealth. The 19th century Balkan wars were fought by polities with small administrative and fiscal apparatuses and with miniscule and highly unprofessional armies. Out of seven violent conflicts that can be termed wars, six (First and Second Serbian Uprising (1804–1813; 1815–1817), Ottoman-Montenegrin warfare (1852–3; 1858–9, 1861), Serbo-Ottoman war of 1876, Serbo-Bulgarian war of 1885 and Greco-Ottoman war of 1897) were little more than limited and largely disorganised skirmishes resulting in a few thousand fatalities each. In fact, most of these small wars have proved less destructive than peasant rebellions and other social upheavals and revolutionary events such as the Wallachian uprisings of 1821 and 1848, the Cretan Insurrections (1821–24; 1856; 1866; 1897, 1905), the Herzegovinian rebellion of 1875 and the Bulgarian (April) uprising of 1876.

Even the Greek war of Independence, which is the only 19th century Balkan war of greater magnitude resulting in possibly up to 120,000 deaths, was not so much a regular military conflict defined by battlefields and armies but an extremely chaotic, disorganised
series of events characterized by large scale massacres of civilians and rampant infighting between different groupings on the Greek side. Hence an overwhelming number of casualties were civilians slaughtered by an unruly mob posing as soldiers. More importantly, the most decisive military operations, such as the battle of Navarino (1827) that ultimately determined the outcome of this war, were fought by British, French and Russian militaries and “involved not a single Greek except for Greek mercenaries serving with the Turkish fleet” (Clodfelter 1992: 323).

Despite its chaotic character the Greek case provides some support for Tilly’s thesis as the by-product of this protracted conflict was a state that, although quite weak by western European standards, was in most respects infrastructurally the strongest polity in the early 19th century Balkans. However this relative strength was also the consequence of pre-war developments such as the emergence of a larger merchant strata (bankers, traders dominating Ottoman trade), the importance of the sea for trade, communication and transport and the organisational and ideological support of the governments and civil society groups in Western Europe who combined geo-political interest with neo-Hellenic romanticism (Palaiaret 1997; Sugar 1977).

In contrast to the 19th century history of small wars and weak states, the early 20th century Balkans, just as the rest of Europe, was defined by large scale protracted and highly destructive warfare. Since from the end of the Franco-Prussian war in 1870 much of Europe enjoyed an unprecedented period of “long peace”, the onset of the First (1912–13) and Second Balkan wars (1913) were experienced as a shock and a throwback to the past, barbarian, epochs. Most Western politicians, intellectuals and the press depicted the Balkans as a medieval, backward and uncivilised region, an “Asiatic khanate”. However, it was rather the accelerated modernisation and state building on the Western European model, which took off in the last two decades of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, that was at the heart of the mass destruction provoked by these two and other 20th century wars. Rather than being a historical reversal, the Balkan wars were a preview into the European future, a prelude to the two total wars of the 20th century.

The dramatic intensity of these two wars paralleled the speedy development of state structures at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century in the Balkans. The administrative apparatus of all Balkan states expanded spectacularly during this period. For example, in Serbia state bureaucracy increased from 492 administrators in 1837, to 1,151 in 1842 to the point where between 1895–1902 more than 22% of all households of Belgrade were
inhabited by bureaucrats (Stokes 1975). This trend continued in monarchist Yugoslavia where Serb-dominated bureaucracy grew to 172,000 in 1928 (Lampe 1996:130).

Similarly, in Bulgaria public sector employment rose from 27,989 in 1904 to 49,683 in 1911 and jumped to 130,000 (if the families of public sector employees are included this amounts to 650,000) in 1941 (Kulischer 1948; Stoianovich 1994:202). This meant that more than 25% of Sofia’s population were civil servants and their families: 1 in 4 employed individuals in Sofia and 1 in 12 in the rest of the country was a state administrator (Roudometof 2001:162). In their attempt to quickly modernise Serbia, the constitutionalist oligarchs, who ruled the state from 1842 to 1858, introduced tenured administrative posts and expanded the rights and privileges of civil servants (Djordjevic 1985). From the mid 19th century all the way to the present day the state became and remained the most important source of employment. The number of public sector employees in Greece gradually rose from 23,187 in 1870 to 31,001 in 1879 and 33,027 in 1889 to reach the staggering count of 130,000 in 1941 which with family members (650,000) constituted a third of the entire urban population of Greece (Roudometof 2001:165–6).

The Balkans, at the end of the 19th and early 20th century, saw substantial expansion in infrastructural powers of new states including huge improvements in transport and communications. By 1883 the Serbian polity was in possession of 3,414.5 kilometres of paved roads, almost five times the amount of roads it had in 1858 (Stoianovitch 1994:82). In Bosnia and Herzegovina intensive road building commenced only between 1878 and 1891 when nearly 2000 kilometres of road were built. As most of transport in Greece was conducted by sea the focus was on building bigger and better ships. Hence by 1927 Greece had 504 steamships (against Yugoslavia’s 144). The railway proved to be an important generator of social development and by 1913 there was over 8,200 kilometres of rail track throughout the Balkans (Milenkovic 1936: 27–54; Mirkovic 1958: 286–87).

The new states became gradually capable of organising and pacifying the domestic realm by conducting the first censuses, establishing registers of ownership and title deeds on land. For example, until 1871 the Greek state had no register of land ownership but from them until 1911 it issued 350,000 title deeds (Mouzelis 1978:15; McGrew 1985:213). The Serbian economy became less dependent on trade with Austro-Hungary as the “Pig war” (1906–11) helped promote domestic industrial development and new export markets abroad. In the first decade of the 20th century the Serbian industrial infrastructure grew significantly increasing the
number of industrial enterprises from 153 to 465 and breaking the Austrian monopoly on trade (Vucinich 1968:235; Dragnich 1974:64). Due to investments in petrol production Romania quickly became the economic leader in the region: in 1928 it was the sixth largest world producer of petrol (Pearson, 1971).

The end of the 19th century coincided with the increased professionalization of Balkan militaries. All Balkan states increased military spending, introduced universal conscription, established large standing armies, military academies and substantially increased officer corps. For example, by 1882 the Greek army consisted of 30,000 soldiers while between 1872 and 1895 the officer corps was enlarged by 240% (from 700 to 1,800). Bulgarian and Serbian armies modernised and significantly expanded at the same time. The size of the Bulgarian military increased by 50% and at the beginning of the 20th century it numbered close to 90,000 soldiers. In the Serbian case this increase was even more substantial as between 1893–1903 the army grew fourfold.

The consequence of these structural changes was the ability of Balkan states to mobilise large sections of their population to fight in the two Balkan wars and WWI. In the first Balkan war (1912), Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece were capable of mobilising up to million soldiers with Bulgarian government managing to call up '599,878 men out of total male population of 1,914,160 (Hall 2010:16–19, 24). By 1918 900,000 men, that is 40% of entire male population of Bulgaria had been conscripted (Bell 1977:122).

The second Balkan war (1913) was similar with Bulgarian military fielding 360,000 troops against 300,000 Serbian, 121,000 Greek, 13,000 Montenegrin soldiers and up to 400,000 Romanian and 250,000 Ottoman troops (Hall 2000: 108–119). The human costs of these wars were enormous with, for example, Bulgaria losing by 1918 300,000 men (out of which 100,000 were killed) to several wars (Bell 1977:123).

Although this strong initial link between increased military mobilisation and state development vindicates in part Tilly’s thesis, the outcome of these wars appears to contradict the Western European experience. While in Tilly’s original cases prolonged warfare proved beneficial to long term state building as it enhanced infrastructural powers as well as civil societies, the consequences of the Balkan wars were rather different. Despite the fact that, for example, Serbia, Greece, Montenegro and Romania were the clear winners of both Balkan wars and WWI and significantly expanded their territories, mobilised huge sectors of the population and large resources for the wars, this fact in itself did not determine the direction of state building. Not only did the 1920s and 30s bring...
about infrastructurally weak Balkan polities but more importantly there were no substantial differences between those Balkan states that lost these wars, such as Bulgaria and Turkey, and those that found themselves on the winning side, such as Serbia, Montenegro or Greece.

The foreign trade of all Balkan states fell significantly between 1920s and 1930s and the gap between them and the developed world continued to increase. There was very little domestic capital and the majority of investment originated either in foreign capital or the state. For example, close to 35% of total capital investment in Yugoslavia by 1936 was foreign (Stoianovich 1994:216). State power did expand dramatically but for most part, to use Weberian language, it resembled a patrimonial, rather than a legal-rational/bureaucratic state. The states’ monopolies, heavily dependent on foreign capital, proved highly detrimental to economic and political development. Not only was the state in possession of all capital industries (radio, telecommunications, mines, forests, post, railroads, etc.) but the state remained the most important employer.

Thus, to understand such a different outcome in Western Europe and the Balkans it is crucial to focus on the role nationalism played in forging strong states. As many analysts of the nation-formation have demonstrated the Western European experience was often marked by the successful combination of state and nation building. As Breuilly (1983), Hobsbawm (1990) and Mann (1993, 1995) show, in much of Western Europe nationalism was a backbone of cohesive state formation. In this part of the world early proto-nationalist movements were usually promoters of liberal ideals, democratisation and republicanism. Nationalism was one of the early pillars of social change helping politicise wider populations and encourage a broader sense of civil citizenship. As Mann 1995) argues, in France and Britain nationalism was a crucial legitimising device for effective state centralisation, fiscal control and infrastructural expansion. For Breuilly (1982), nationalism was vital for the development of the modern liberal state as it offered a “solution” to the great divide between the public and the private sphere, a divide generated by intensive modernisation. For Shils (1995), there is no vibrant civil society and cohesive state without a popular conception of nationhood and in the Western Europe they have evolved together.

The fact that warfare has proved to be a less decisive factor in Balkan state development than in the rest of Europe has a great deal to do with the weaknesses of nationalism in this part of the world. Let us explore this phenomenon in greater detail.
4. From Religious Millenarianism and Local Attachments to Nationalist Ideologies

The Balkan region is commonly perceived as a breeding ground of nationalism. This view is often shared not only by journalists and the general public but also by many academic historians who interpret the collapse of the Ottoman and Habsburg empires through the prism of the “awakening of nationalities”, “national revolutions” and “romantic nationalisms” among early 19th century Balkan peoples (e.g. Jelavich and Jelavich 1965; Pavlowitch 1999, Hupchick 2002; Gerolymatos 2004). Furthermore the pioneering sociological account of the rise of nationalism, that of Ernest Gellner (1964, 1983), is, as already emphasised, disputed on the grounds that it seems unable to explain the origins of national uprisings in the early 19th century Balkans. It is alleged that since Gellner ties nationalism to industrialisation his theory cannot explain the emergence of potent Greek and Serbian nationalisms before industrialisation in the Balkans (O’Leary 1998, Minogue 2001; Mouzelis 1998, 2007).

This is, I would argue, a highly problematic view that often projects contemporary concepts into the past. If nationalism is understood as a cross class ideology that advocates unity of culture and politics, that is, the moral right of culturally homogenous entities – nations – to live in politically independent and sovereign states, than there was little if any nationalism in the Balkans before the late 19th century. Furthermore, if nationalism is conceptualised as a sociological phenomenon whereby a large majority of the population see themselves and are perceived by others as members of distinct, mutually exclusive, nations who have a “distinct character”, whose “national interests and values” take “priority over all other interests and values” and who advocate “attainment of political sovereignty” (Breuilly 1993:2) then I argue nationalism was politically irrelevant for most of the 19th century Balkans. In this context, and contra Tilly, warfare has proved to be less a determining factor of state formation in the Balkans because it lacked a crucial ingredient that underpinned West European state building – the cohesive force of nationalism. Consequently, the character and intensity of nationalism in the Balkans was often shaped more by the intensive, peace time, state building than by the direct war experience (Malešević 2002; 2006).

To understand the development of nationalist ideology in the Balkans it is necessary to take a brief look at the role of religion and cultural difference in the Ottoman Empire. As with all pre-modern polities, the Ottoman Empire was a deeply stratified social order where the tiny military aristocracy (Askeri) ruled over a huge
peasantry (reaya). This was a world where religion and aristocratic lineage rather than cultural difference were a principal source of social inclusion and exclusion. Hence, this was a polity that legitimised its existence in relation to the Islamic religious doctrine and ruled its subjects through the relatively segregated confessional communities – millets. The fact that millets were run by the high clergy who were able to rely on autonomous legal courts to enforce their will meant that these religious authorities were in a position to foster cultural assimilation under the guise of religious unity.

Consequently, the Orthodox Christian millet, called the Rum millet, was defined, named after and run by the Greek (Romioi) religious hierarchy although it included all Orthodox Christians. The privileged position of the Greek Orthodox clergy proved to be crucial in the later stages of the Ottoman Empire as it operated as a mechanism for the cultural assimilation of non-Greek speaking Orthodox Christians. As Roudometof (2001:48) emphasises: “before 1850s social mobility frequently implied acculturation into the ethnie associated with a particular niche in the social division of labour”. Hence there was an overlap between one’s class and ethnic background: being a “Serb” or “Bulgar” or other “Slav” implied one’s peasant status and moving to town and becoming a merchant meant often becoming a “Greek”. Even until mid 19th century Greek was the language of the Christian upper middle classes in Belgrade who “went about with worry beads (brojanice) and wore a half-melon cap (dinjara) in the manner of the Greeks” (Stoianovich 1994:294). The legacy of the millet system was the fact that until the early to mid 19th century most middle class Orthodox Christians were inclined to see themselves as Greek. However, this in itself was no sign of their willingness to support the establishment of an independent Greek state or even propensity to think along these lines. Rather than conceptualising “Greekness” in ethno-national terms, this was a status category that one could acquire by climbing the social ladder (Fine 2006; Roudometoff 2001; Kitromilides 1994).

What is in the traditional historical accounts often interpreted as the “awakening of nations” in the early 19th century Balkans was in reality a rather confused, unarticulated set of ideas shared by a very small number of, mostly upper middle class, individuals interested in the transformation or overthrow of the Ottoman rule. The establishment of secret societies in the early 19th century such as “Society of Friends” (Philiki Etaireia), Macedonian Society, Big Brotherhood, Philorthodox organisation and others is often wrongly interpreted as an early attempt towards promoting national independence. Instead, most of these societies were composed of culturally and politically highly diverse individuals who advocated
different and largely undeveloped, vague concepts of cultural, religious and political renewal. Thus, instead of promoting nationalist ideas, they oscillated between a wish to re-create the Byzantine Empire, establish a Christian pan-Balkan polity, reform the Ottoman state or create a federation of Balkan peoples (Pavlowitch 1999:26; Roudometoff 2001:77).

It is important to emphasise that most influential and wealthier Christians living under Ottoman rule had little or no interest in abolishing this empire. The higher clergy of the Orthodox Church enjoyed political privilege and religious autonomy, the Phanariot families ran much of the Ottoman administration, foreign policy and trade which made them powerful and wealthy and boyars too benefited from the Ottoman status quo as it enabled them to be large land owners, administrators and possessors of serf labour (Jelavich and Jelavich 1965; Hupchick 2002). Hence, the Christian cultural and political elite of the Balkans had no interest in supporting the break up of the Ottoman Empire. On the other side, the majority of the Christian population were peasants whose principal concern was daily survival and for whom their Christian overlords were just as unbearable as the Muslim ones. For example, in Wallachia and Moldova “the peasantry desired the overthrow of boyars, whereas the lower boyars desired the overthrow of the Phanariot princes and the usurpation of administrative power for themselves” (Roudometoff 2001:231).

Therefore what would later be termed as “the Greek War of Independence” started not in Greece but in, what is today, Romania as infighting between the Christian elites as Ypsilantis and Vladimirescu’s forces rebelled against Phanariot rule. Although in today’s nationalist narratives these two leaders are seen as “national liberators” their own motives were very much more complex and contradictory, having little to do with the modern ideology of nationalism (Georgescu 1991: 78–99; Glenny 2000: 57–59).

As this part of Europe was not exposed to secularist ideas and tendencies articulated by the Enlightenment and Romanticism and vigorously imposed through French and American revolutions, the political and cultural life was still dominated by the religious and confessional worldviews. Consequently, the first to rebel against the Ottoman rule were not motivated by nationalist goals but by religious millenarianism or locally based attachments. Rather than conceptualising politics in terms of popular sovereignty, these early 19th century visions were inspired by the religious prophecies that tied the collapse of the Ottoman rule to the Second Coming of Christ (Mango 1965) or return of individual saints such as St. Sava (Stoianovitch 1994:168). The focus here was not on providing
political room for culturally distinct communities, as in nationalist principles, but on achieving spiritual regeneration through the resurrection of a Christian kingdom on the ruins of a Muslim empire. These millenarian visions were sustained by little understood natural events such as eclipses of the moon and sun (in 1804), the appearance of visible comets (in 1781, 1791, 1807), and large thunderstorms (in 1801) (Stoianovich 1994:169). In this sense millenarian ideas were supported by the Orthodox clergy: “Millenarianism provided the official Church doctrine with a political orientation that led to de facto recognition of Ottoman rule and at the same time denied –in principle- the Sultan’s legitimacy” (Roudometoff 2001:53).

Thus, the two Serbian uprisings and the Greek war of Independence had very little to do with nationalist zeal and coherent programmes of “national self-determination”. These and other Balkan rebellions were undertaken by the motley crew of pig traders, merchants, pastoralists, bandits, military renegades and some peasants all of whom were motivated by different interests and goals. While peasants rebelled against the imposition of a “second serfdom” and increasing despotism of self-ruling ayans (such as Ali Pasha Tepelenli, Mehmed Ali, Pasvanoglou) and janissaries, pig traders and merchants wanted the restoration of order to increase trade, while most bandits were opportunists willing to easily switch sides for money. The First and Second Serbian Uprisings (1804–1813, 1815–1817) were essentially peasant rebellions led by the two illiterate pig-traders and bandits, Karadjordje and Obrenović, who did not rebel against the Ottoman rule but attempted to “restore order’ on behalf of the Sultan and against the usurpers of legitimate authority” (Roudometoff 2001: 24). Neither Karadjordje nor Obrenović knew much about, nor were interested in, promoting Serbian nationalism. Rather their principal goal was political and economic control over the small patch of land with a view to expanding their own economic interests. Similarly, an overwhelming majority of the population, the peasantry, had no sense of nationhood and only a vague feeling of religious solidarity.

As Gellner’s (1964, 1983) theory of nationalism emphasises, there is no strong nationalist ideology without full literacy and the state sponsored educational systems. The Serbian peasantry was completely illiterate in 1804 and it took another sixty years for Serbia’s population to reach a literacy rate of only 4.2%. Even in 1900 only 17% of the population was literate (Ekmečić 1991:333; Jelavich 1990:40). The development of an educational system was very slow: in 1804 there were just 2 schools in the entire country; in 1830 there were only 16 primary schools in towns and a couple of village schools with as little as 800 pupils and 22 teachers in the
whole country (Karanovich 1995; Stoianovich 1994:208–9). Book publishing was almost nonexistent as there was no audience for literary works; there were no intellectuals during the Serbian uprisings, and the entire 18th century produced only 3 Serbian historians all of which, just as future administrators and teachers, came from the Habsburg Empire (Roudometoff 2001: 49; 115; Stoianovich 1994: 168). Similarly, there were only 35 schools in Bulgaria in 1800, all of which were conducted through Old Church Slavonic and not in the standardised Bulgarian vernacular. The literacy rates in Bulgaria for 1881–4 were as low as 4.5% for males and 1.5% for females. The first book printed in modern Bulgarian appeared only in 1806 and between 1806 and 1830 just 17 books were published, nearly all of them with a focus on the religious themes. Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania were in an even worse position: the first primary school opened in Montenegro in 1834 and the opening of the first Albanian school had to wait until 1887 (Roudometoff 2001: 149, 165). Although the population of Greece started from a higher educational and literacy base and had a significantly larger middle class that originated in the 18th and 19th century commercialisation of the Ottoman cities where Greek merchants and bankers controlled much of the trade and capital investments, it too had low levels of literacy. For example, in 1830 only 8% of school age children attended elementary school and in 1840 male literacy was only 12.5% while female illiteracy remained at 93.7% even in 1870 (Roudometoff 2001: 110; 165).

In addition, as the Orthodox Church was an integral and in most respects privileged part of the Ottoman administrative structure the clergy was fiercely opposed to the idea of Greek independence. It strongly resisted the fashion to give children ancient Greek names, it was against the standardisation of the Greek vernacular and generally opposed romanticist ideas and practices to revive antique Hellenic heritage (Kitromilides 2010:36–41; 1994). Hence to sum up, the early 19th century wars and uprisings were not the product of nationalist sentiments as an overwhelming majority of Balkan populations had neither ideological capacity nor organisational means to understand their world in national terms (Paxton, 1972; Stokes; 1976; Djordjevic 1985).

Nationalism became more important only after the creation of independent Balkan states and even then it remained a prerogative of a relatively small section of the top state and court administrators, higher military personnel, political and cultural elites and some middle classes. The main line of polarisation in most Balkan societies was urban vs. rural as the establishment of new, small, economically dependent states created a situation where the urban
based bureaucratic apparatuses of new states were constantly expanding at the expense of the productive peasantry.

From the second half of the 19th century onwards most Balkan states consisted of two principal strata: peasant small holders and state employees. For example, from 1834 85% of Bulgarian peasants owned their own land; from 1835/8 the Serbian state legalised possession of fields and forests by village communities and prohibited large land ownerships; in Greece after 1832 land was nominally in state ownership but in reality was occupied by a huge number of small land holders (Mouzelis 1978). In contrast, the ever rising urban population remained heavily dependent on state employment. However, as this strata increased to huge levels, in some instances constituting one third of the population, it presented an enormous burden for overall economic development. Consequently, political life became hostage to state administration’s dependence on peasantry which ultimately led towards a lack of commercial cities, absence of industrial development, authoritarianism, proliferation of clientlist networks and dependency on foreign capital and loans. The ultimate result of this was that receptiveness towards nationalist ideologies was present almost exclusively among the state supporting strata – administrators, military, politicians and cultural elite, whereas a large majority of the population – free land owning peasants – had little or no interest in nationalism (Paxton, 1972; Stokes; 1976; Djordjevic 1985). As Roudometoff (2001: 158) puts it succinctly: the “creation of an independent free holding peasantry in Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria, coupled with the peasantry’s ability to influence electoral results, led the Balkan elites to employ the state as a mechanism of fiscal extraction and income redistribution toward the state-dependent urban strata. From 1880 to 1920, it was the urban strata that favoured irredentism, with the military corps at the forefront”.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries were periods of intensive state sponsored propagation of nationalist ideologies and the military mobilisation of large sectors of the population. The acquisition of territory was seen as a principal source of economic growth, geopolitical stability and state pride. All Balkan states invested a great deal in educational systems, publishing, cultural events, language policies and mass media to articulate and spread particular versions of nationalist narratives. In this sense Serbian government made the ekavian dialect an official language of Serbia in order to bring the official Serbian much closer to the spoken vernacular of the Slavs living in Macedonia (Poulton 1995:63). The school textbooks of history, geography and literature focused on moulding new generations of “nationally conscious” Serbs, Greeks,
Bulgarians etc. Greek historians, folklorists and artists were encouraged to produce works which would celebrate the Greek nation and “prove” the existence of an uninterrupted continuity between the ancient Greeks, Byzantine Empire and modern Greeks which would give credence to further territorial claims.

The khlepts and armatoi were depicted as nationally conscious heroes fighting for the idea of a sovereign Greece and the state provided funds for the publication of a “History of the Greek Nation” (1865–74) by Paparrigopoulos which became and still is the official narrative taught in the Greek educational system (Roudometoff 2001: 107–10; Mouzelis 2007). In a similar vein, the Serbian state encouraged new historiography and arts that reinterpreted Kosovo legend, Njegoš’s Monoutain Wrath and traditional oral poetry, all of which originally espoused millenarian ideas, in the direction of fierce nationalism (Emmert 1990; Jelavich 1989). The Bulgarian state too sponsored publications such as those of Georgi Stoikov Rakovski that glorified romantic views of oral and peasant culture as an uncorrupted depository of pure Bulgarian consciousness. It too embarked on expanding and reshaping the educational system in line with nationalist goals and ambitions. In most instances these state policies were driven in part by the vision of greater Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria etc. In the Greek case this was a re-articulation of Kolletis’s 1843 “Megali Idea” (Great Idea) that initially was more of a millenarian project but by the end of the century became a relatively coherent program of territorial expansion. Similarly, Garašanin’s program (Načertanije) which originally focused on making the Serbian economy independent of the Habsburg Empire was later transformed into a blueprint for Greater Serbia (Stoianovitch 1994:103).

However, despite all of these intensive state sponsored activities intended to turn peasants into Serbs, Bulgarians, Greeks, or Albanians, as all available data shows, a majority of the population at the turn of the 20th century remained mostly indifferent towards nationalist ideology (Kitromilides 2010; 1994, Djordjevic 1985; Stokes 1976). In all Balkan states peasantry constituted the majority and, as Gellner and other theorists of nationalism have persuasively argued, peasants are not natural born nationalists. Their lack of literacy, localism, inherent suspicions about city based authorities, non-participation in military draft and economic exploitation by the state have traditionally made peasantry deeply resentful of nationalism. In the Balkans of this period all of these suspicions were further reinforced by the fact that peasants were small land holders and as such were deeply reluctant towards military adventures stemming from nationalist aspirations. In this context they often found themselves in conflict with an urban, more
educated and more state dependent, population who by the turn of
the century did become more nationalist.

In Serbia, the key proponents of aggressive nationalism were
military officers, intellectuals and top civil servants while political
parties representing peasantry regularly opposed irredentist and
nationalist causes: peasants – that is an overwhelming majority of
the population – opposed war with the Ottomans in 1875 and
during the whole Eastern Crisis of 1875–78 demonstrated stronger
local and regional than national attachments. During the discus-
sion about the possible war with the Ottomans following the insur-
rection in Bosnia of 1875 the peasant deputy summarised the
general feeling in the countryside by declaring: “If we wrench
Bosnia, my own field will not become any larger” (Djordjevic
1985:311). In Bosnia itself most peasantry identified through
religious/confessional rather than national categories: in late 19th
century Serb cultural nationalists, such as teacher Petranović’s
group, toured the countryside “teaching Orthodox peasants to stop
calling themselves hrišćani and start calling themselves Serbs”
(Roudometoff 2001: 148). The Bulgarian peasants were even more
resentful towards nationalism as their relative prosperity made
them supportive of the status quo and antagonistic towards the
urban population who advocated irredentist policies: they did not
take part in the April Uprising of 1876 and, just as the Greek
peasantry, for much of this period including the Balkan wars and
WWI, remained non interested or directly opposed to nationalist
ideas (Kitromilides 2010; 1994; Glenny 1999). As new states
embarked on the large projects of state and military building the
peasantry became discontent as it had to fund these projects.

Even the onset of two Balkan wars and WWI when peasantry was
politicised and mobilised to fight for the national cause did not
dramatically change this non-nationalist, and in many instances
anti-militarist, attitude. These highly destructive wars brought
about more disillusionment with the state as it was the peasantry
that lost the most during the wars. In Bulgaria the main political
party representing peasantry, Bulgarian Agrarian National Union,
was from the beginning opposed to the Bulgarian involvement in
the Balkan wars and WWI. The Bulgarian peasant soldiers were
often reluctant to fight and “wanted to go home” (Hall 2000:103).
On the eve of the second Balkan war in 1913 the Bulgarian officer
characterised their general mood: “The spirit of the soldiers was,
in general, considerably reduced and not answerable to the
theoretical operative calculations of the high command” (Hall,
2000:103). The military defeat in this war and again in WWI just
reinforced the anti-militarism and anti-nationalism of the Bulgar-
ian peasants (Bell 1977; Crampton 1983). Although Greece, Serbia
and Montenegro found themselves on the winning side, in all three wars the aftermath of war did not bring about a significant increase in nationalist feelings among the still majority peasant population (Roudometoff 2001:174–5).

Hence for most of the 19th century and early 20th century Balkan populations were not particularly responsive to nationalist ideologies. Rather than being a principal cause of various wars nationalism remained a marginal ideological force for much of this period.

5. Nationalism, Warfare and State Formation

Entrenched nationalism and protracted warfare are regularly identified as the key causes of political and economic underdevelopment in the Balkans. It is often argued that “the Balkan past is littered with the tribalism, ethnic nationalism [and] warmongering” and that “at the heart of all the Balkan wars is the clarion call of ethnic hatred” which has prevented the region from catching up with the rest of developed world (Gerolymatos 2004:5). Drawing critically on Tilly and Gellner’s theories I have tried to show that the opposite was the case: the fact that the Balkans did not experience prolonged periods of inter-state warfare until 1912 and that nationalism as a fully fledged trans-class ideology was almost nonexistent in the region until well into the 20th century made this part of the world barren for effective state development.

In contrast to early Western Europe, where state and nation formation often went hand in hand and where protracted warfare increased the infrastructural potency of states and eventually made its citizens loyal to their respective polities, the relative stability and shortage of large scale warfare in the Balkans has contributed to the fact that the region lagged behind in the development of state capacity. Whereas there was little if any significant warfare from the 16th to 18th centuries in the Balkan peninsula, the 19th century was characterised by chaotic, small scale wars of relative short duration and, with the partial exception of the Greek War of Independence, low casualty rates. In this context the rulers of the Balkans states had no interest, will, need or means to extract extra resources and consequently the banking, fiscal systems, military organisation and other state apparatuses remained undeveloped until the last decades of the 19th century. Such a direction of state (un)development in the Balkans resembles the experience of Latin America where, as Centeno (2002:20–26) shows, limited wars made limited states and it might seem ultimately to prove Tilly’s point that there is no effective state building without prolonged wars. However, rather than being the exemplary prototype that fully vindicates Tilly’s model the Balkan story is more complicated. The
developments in the Balkans in the late 19th and early 20th century often contradict Tilly’s diagnosis; although the infrastructural powers of Balkan states increased in the second half of the 19th century and the states were able to mobilise resources, materiel and people, including huge numbers of soldiers and armaments to fight in the two Balkan wars and World War I, this in itself did not materialise in the stronger capabilities of these states in the post-war era. Not only did the 1920s and 1930s bring further economic stagnation and state inability to effectively tax, police, administer and provide social support for its citizens, but more significantly there was no difference between those states that were the ultimate winners of these large scale protracted wars and those that found themselves on the losing side. Regardless of the fact that Serbia, Greece, Romania and Montenegro mobilised huge resources and people during the two Balkan wars and WWI and, as a result of their victory, expanded their territories, neutralised internal insurrections and established their authority over large areas, their state development and economic and political growth were no better than that of states that lost these wars and large chunks of their territories and were required to pay war reparations, such as Turkey and Bulgaria.

While there is no doubt that global and regional geopolitical, economic and other external factors played an important part in making the Balkans economically and politically undeveloped, to fully understand the state weakness in the region it is necessary to focus on the structural historical imbalance between state and nation formation. Since Tilly neglects the cohesive role that ideology plays in state and nation building his model cannot explain different outcomes in the relationship between state and war in the Balkans. As Centeno (2002:106) puts it: “Wars can only make states if they are preceded by at least a modicum of political organisation. Without institutional cohesion, wars will make for chaos and defeat. Wars . . . cannot create institutions out of thin air. The consolidation of central authority and the creation of a modicum of a bureaucracy appear to have preceded the state-making stage of war in England, France and Prussia”. In other words, warfare is no more than a catalyst of state building but to ignite and sustain fire one needs solid and durable wood; that is there has to be potent political organisations and social movements to capitalise on the war experience. As Breuilly (1982) and Mann (1986, 1995) demonstrate, in Western Europe nationalism was an important catalyst of social mobilisation. The nationalist cultural, political and economic movements have proved decisive in popularising the Enlightenment and Romanticist ideas of popular sovereignty, autonomy, citizenship, liberty, fraternity, democracy,
republicanism and equality. Although national revolutions, uprisings and political and social reforms did not radically alter the stratified characters of their polities these social movements and political organisations were vital in transforming the ideological discourse through which new states were legitimised. Hence, instead of the divine origins of monarchs the new principles of legitimacy have centred on popular representation which often blended ethnic and civic categories and reinforced state building with nation building.

In contrast to Western Europe, the polities that emerged in the early 19th century Balkans were not the result of “ancient national aspirations” nor have they transpired as a consequence of strong nationalist movements. Instead “independence” arrived as a highly contingent historical outcome that often came against the will of all social strata inhabiting these polities: the rulers, the clergy, the merchants, the bankers and the peasantry. The new political entities came about as an unintended by-product of the Ottoman Empire’s collapse and as such were not states in any sociologically meaningful sense. Once established they gradually became a locus of highly personalised rule whereby the new rulers attempted to maintain themselves in power through the constant expansion of, initially rudimentary, administrative strata. When confronted with peasant rebellions and uprisings the rulers were forced to give away land and allow the emergence of free peasant small holders. The outcome of such policies were highly polarised societies where the large scale peasantry and ever growing patrimonial bureaucrats were at each other throats and where the majority of the population for much of the 19th century did not identify with their states. Hence, not only did nationalist ideology play little or no part in the establishment of new Balkan states, but nationalism remained an insignificant ideological force until the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. Nevertheless, even when the nationalist rhetoric was embraced as a principal political discourse it still continued to be a preserve of minority in all Balkan states: the military establishment, political and cultural elites and bureaucrats and their families. Thus, it is not the strength but the weakness of nationalism that proved crucial for underdevelopment of states in this region.

As Gellner’s account makes clear there is no mass nationalism without standardised languages, state sponsored educational systems or high literacy rates and in the Balkans none of these preconditions existed at the birth of the new Balkan polities. Hence, there is no point in using the Balkan case to demonstrate that nationalist ideologies can emerge before industrialisation as
there was neither much industrialisation nor nationalism in the Balkans of the 19th century. Rather than being a cause of wars of “independence”, nationalism was a by-product of state development. It is only at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century – as the organisational and infrastructural powers of the Balkan polities substantially increased – that nationalism became a significant ideological force in political life. Hence it is the period of relative peace and stability that created conditions for the gradual proliferation of nationalist discourses. However, even at this time, most peasants, the majority of the population, remained unreceptive to the nationalist rhetoric and largely ignorant towards the expansionist ideas formulated in Athens, Belgrade, Sofia or Tirana.

The aftermath of the two Balkan wars and WWI demonstrated clearly the limits of nationalism for state building in the region. While the war successes could have served as a catalyst of intensive political and economic development in Serbia, Greece or Romania, as they had earlier in Prussia, England and France, this did not happen. Instead of catching up with the rest of the developed world, the Balkan states were further going in the opposite direction. In this context, rather than being a cohesive glue of state formation, nationalism often developed as an anti-state force fuelled by social discontent, economic backwardness and rural dissatisfaction.

The Balkan case indicates that although wars can prove important catalysts of state formation they may not necessarily contribute to nation formation. When the state and nation emerge together wars are likely to act as an impetus for further state development but when the two processes develop around different trajectories they can find themselves on collision course and nation-formation (or the lack of it) can undermine state development.

To sum up, contrary to the mainstream views that explain the fragility of states and the economic underdevelopment in the Balkans by invoking the imagery of persistent warfare and endemic nationalism, it is the lack of prolonged inter-state warfare and the frailty of nationalist ideologies that have proved historically to be fundamental obstacles for social development.

Note

1 Anderson (1983:22–27; 192–198) emphasises the importance of clocks and calendars for the changing popular perceptions of time: from “the mediaeval conception of simultaneity-along-time” to “homogeneous, empty time” In this context public clocks are particularly significant.
References


