

Florian Keisinger  
University Tuebingen  
SFB 437 – ‘War experiences’  
Brunnenstrasse 30  
72074 Tuebingen  
Germany  
[Florian.Keisinger@uni-tuebingen.de](mailto:Florian.Keisinger@uni-tuebingen.de)

*Conference Paper*

New Histories of politics – topics, theories and methods in the history of politics beyond great events and great men (18-20 May, CEU Budapest)

**The experience of war and warfare in the Balkans by English, German and Irish newspapers and journals, 1876-1913**

*Near Eastern, Near Western Question*

In 1877, during the course of the Russo-Turkish war, the nationalist Irish weekly *The Nation* pointed out that European attention seemed completely absorbed by the complex problems which occur in the East. Furthermore, it criticised that in contrast to the frequently-mentioned *Near Eastern Question*, the *Near Western Question* – the ‘Irish Question’ – does not even exist in European consciousness.

Thirty-five years later, during the Balkan Wars 1912/13, the monthly *Irish Freedom* expressed some hope that the expulsion of the Turks from European soil, after more than half a millennium of occupation, and therefore the solution of the *Eastern Question*, might involve the chance to bring the Irish problem towards the attention of a broader continental public.

But although the situation in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland and South-Eastern Europe had (even on closer examination) various aspects in common – both were occupied by a foreign power, tangled up in a lengthy and, in large parts, violent struggle for their national autonomy, which was marked by devastating setbacks – the attention, with which both areas of conflict were observed by the European public, could not be more different. The *Near Eastern Question*, as the most widespread newspaper of Irish nationalism, the *Freeman’s Journal* rightly pointed out in 1913, was a European problem, while the Irish Question was perceived as a solely British problem.

The reason therefore was a rather simple one, on which more or less all observing forces agreed upon: the worst case scenario that could occur from the Irish problem was a Civil War in the north-western corner of Europe, in which, at most, would involve some British troops. Unrest in the South-East, however, always included the possibility and the danger of a general conflagration, into which the great nations of Europe as a whole were

likely to plunge. That was the case during the months of the Russo-Turkish war of the 1870s, and did not change until the Balkan Wars of 1912/13.

Even during summer 1903, when rather minor revolts appeared in the district of Macedonia, European newspapers expressed their serious concern about maintaining the sensitive good called 'peace of Europe'. I quote from the *Times*:

"Were it a mere question as between Turkey and the Macedonian committee on the one hand, and Bulgaria and these identical committees on the other hand, we might watch the struggle with some calm [...]. But in the Near Eastern question the Powers of Europe are directly interested – less, it is true, from personal motives, if we except Turkey, Russia and Austria, than from a desire to ensure that no new *régime* is introduced into the Balkans whose advent may in the smallest degree disturb the existing balance of power."

At the eve of the outbreak of the Balkan War 1912, the well-respected German newspaper *Vossische Zeitung* described the Balkan States as simply pawns in a game, whom the greater player will follow. Then, the paper predicted, we would experience a conflagration the world has never seen before [*Weltbrand*], from Moscow to the Pyrenees, from the North Sea to Palermo."

Therefore, for neither Germany nor England, were the Balkans simply an area of passive interest or perception, but rather a 'danger-zone', a field of active political, strategic and also economic interest.

### *Research /Hypothesis*

Locating South-Eastern Europe on a cognitive or mental map of Europe has been of crucial interest for recent Balkan studies. It was especially the work by *Maria Todorova* [*Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford 1997] that had a formative influence on the discussion of the previous years. Todorova assumes the alleged existence of a pejoratively stamped Balkan-discourse (she names it "balkanism") by 'the West', which – after its continual rise during the 18<sup>th</sup> and especially 19<sup>th</sup> centuries – finally reached its peak during the Balkan Wars and the First World War. And it is this discourse, according to Todorova, that still determines the contemptuous perception of South-Eastern Europe by 'the West' today.

However, this paper is based on the assumption that the journalistic discourse of 'the West' during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries concerning South-Eastern Europe was in the first place a political, and much less a cultural one, although cultural images and depictions were a frequent occurrence in this discourse, constantly available to be used flexibly in one way or the other. I furthermore assume that it was this discourse which decisively determined the depictions of certain images of the Balkan-region that appeared in specific parts of each western nation.

This appears to be the case with regard to German society, but above all with regard to the English public, between the 1870s and the eve of World War I. Moreover, it appears as well to be the case – though on another level and partly influenced by different motivations – for Ireland.

Due to the required conciseness of this paper the following examples are predominately restricted to the Irish case; nevertheless, I hope it points out the more general outline of the work.

## *Ireland*

The *Irish Times*, the most influential organ of Irish unionism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, was expressly unwilling to interpret the events of 1876, the uprising in Bosnia and Herzegovina and finally the outbreak of the Serbian-Turkish war, as a deed of national rebellion by the Serbian or Montenegrin people. As the newspaper repeatedly stated, Serbia was an entirely irrelevant state, unless it was not mighty Russia which was backing her. A position, by the way, which also represented quite well the wider attitude of a conservative orientated English and German public.

When Serbia joined the Russo-Turkish war of 1877/78, the Serbian Prince Milan was described as a Russian “puppet prince” and another candidate for the “paradise of pigs.” The Serbian army, in the same comment, is characterized as “well-found in all implements of slaughter.” Just a few days later, the *Irish Times* published reports on atrocities and devastations allegedly committed by Russian and Serbian troops, as well as Bulgarian peasants, on the Muslim populations of the Balkans. These outrages, following the unionist newspaper, exceeded by far the Turkish crimes during the “so-called Bulgarian atrocities”. Furthermore, still in this context, the conduct of the Turkish soldiery was reported as “honourable” and of a kind that deserves the upright sympathy of any observer.

In contrast therefore, the perception of events in the Irish nationalistic public appears to be of a completely different nature.

There is no other country in the world, *Freeman’s Journal* and *Nation* agree upon, that can understand the horrors of the atrocities committed and feel with the Bulgarians like the Irish can. The *Nation* wrote in July 1876:

“Only in the history of Ireland can scenes be found to compare with those that are being perpetrated in Bulgaria and other northern part of Turkey by the Moslem masters of the land. [...] In reading them one must be irresistibly reminded of the savageries of the Elizabethan and Cromwellian soldiery in Ireland.”

The *Freeman’s Journal* pointed out:

“That unhappy province [Bulgaria] has just passed through horrors worse than those which befell Wicklow in 1798.”

Finally, the outbreak of the Russo-Turkish war was not solely perceived as a final and just step towards the liberation of the Near East, but, as an anonymous letter to the editor of the *Nation* showed, as an opportunity for gaining Irish national independence. English involvement in an unavoidable European war, following the reader, would weaken the English position decisively and thus offer the Irish a chance to shake off the occupying forces:

“The Servian rebellion has more emphatically expressed Servian patriotism than if Servia had sent to a Turkish House of Commons at Constantinople sixty Servian Home Rulers, well skilled in debate. And, by the way, it is to be observed that a population on one million and a half furnished 115,000 fighting men. Ireland could do as much, and she would have very many sympathisers, who would practically aid her, on both sides of the Atlantic, and on both sides of the Irish Sea. [...] a little of the fighting element as an adjunct to our parliamentary force

would enlist enthusiasm of many opponents, and strike terror into the hearts of our English masters, who, if they would not say to us ‘The Lord be with you’, would surely say, ‘Go in peace.’”

However, the editorial reaction to this letter appeared rather reserved. Though, of course, such comments were not unfamiliar to the editors of the *Nation*, in this case they were described as “erroneous and visionary.” Referring to the *Near Eastern* and the *Near Western Question*, the *Nation* pointed out that the present situation in Ireland differs from the Serbian case:

“[...] our situation is very different from that of Servia. An Irish insurrection would not produce European complications, diplomatic interventions, and chances of a general war. England might sweep this country from end to end with fire and sword without bringing on herself a single minatory or unpleasant communication from any Power in the world. [...] We therefore think, the Servian policy, which may be very good for Servia, would be quite unsuitable for Ireland, circumstances as she is.”

Nevertheless, should the policy of *Home Rule* fail, the editor of the *Nation* could think of different measures to gain Irish independence. The following lines can unmistakably be interpreted as a threat towards English policy:

“In the day when any great Power, at war with England, says to the Irish race, ‘Here are ships of war to prey upon the commerce of England, come and man them; here is an army to contend with that of England, come and join its ranks; you want money for local operations, here it is’ – in that day one of the most formidable difficulties that ever England had to face will have arisen. In our judgment it would be wise for British statesmen to avert that peril by conceding without delay the fair and reasonable demand of the Irish people for Home Rule.”

The source last mentioned points out that an often claimed clear distinction between moderate and constitutional *Home Rulers* on the one side, and radical and potentially violent Separatists on the other, cannot easily be stated. The moderate newspaper *The Nation* obviously favours the constitutional approach towards national independence, although in 1876 this confession is already linked to the requirement of a successful implementation of *Home Rule* for Ireland. However, several further conditions, like for instance foreign military support, are guaranteed and a reasonable perspective for success exists, also a military solution for the so-called *Near Western Question* is a thoroughly likely scenario.

Moreover, generally the development of the Balkan States was not only perceived as an adequate and appropriate role-model by Irish separatists during the Balkan Wars 1912/13, but also by supposedly moderate voices of the constitutional corner, not just in 1912/13, but also previously, in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Finally, it seems to me that the perception of the Balkan States by ‘the West’ in rather general, culturally-contemptuously stamped terms (like ‘civilised’, ‘un-civilised’ etc.) is not as easy to state as it was done by Maria Todorova in her *Imaging the Balkans*. There is, as pointed out in my paper, an obvious distinction in the reporting on the Balkan States

between the unionist *Irish Times* on the one side, and nationalistic newspapers on the other. But even within such rather fixed patterns of reporting, shifts do not appear to be impossible.

To mention one final example, it seemed as if the weeks and months between late October/November 1912 and March 1913, the time of the great military successes for the Balkan League, saw an atmosphere of 'Balkan enthusiasm' within Irish unionist circles, which had never occurred at any time before.

This, of course, was not completely without selfish considerations. At its peak, the victorious Balkan States were already seen as a powerful partner of a British-led anti-German alliance.

Furthermore, this enthusiasm turned out to be quite short-lived. Delays during the negotiations at the London peace conference, but especially the resistance against combined Europe in the 'Albanian-question', and finally the outbreak of the second Balkan war, brought an end to that short period of time while the expression "gallant little nations" in the Irish unionist public was meant for the Balkan States.