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## BACKGROUND PAPER

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**Topic:** “The Balkan crises: balancing nationalism and great power rivalries in southeastern Europe to avoid WWI ”

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**Historical Committee**

### **Chair and Moderator**

Ricardo Emmanuel Morado Althoff  
& Manolo García Zapién

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# Committee Background

The Historical Committee examines one of the most volatile periods in European history “The Balkan crises of the early twentieth century”, where nationalist movements, imperial ambitions, and shifting alliances intersected to reshape the continent. The Balkans, often called the “Powder Keg of Europe,” were a mosaic of ethnicities and religions under the declining Ottoman Empire, whose retreat left a power vacuum fiercely contested by emerging states like Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Montenegro, as well as great powers such as Austria-Hungary and Russia. The 1908 Bosnian Crisis, when Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina, deepened regional tensions and triggered rivalries that diplomacy struggled to contain. Subsequent conflicts “The Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913” further destabilized the region, redrawing borders and inflaming nationalist aspirations. At the same time, European powers pursued their own strategic interests, turning the Balkans into an arena of influence and mistrust. This complex interplay of nationalism and great power politics set the stage for the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, which ignited the First World War. By revisiting this pivotal moment, the committee aims to explore alternative diplomatic, political, and strategic approaches that could have balanced national ambitions with international stability, preventing a regional dispute from escalating into a global conflict.

# Introduction of the Topic

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The Balkan crises of the early twentieth century represent one of the most critical turning points in European history, as the forces of nationalism and imperial ambition collided in a region long marked by ethnic diversity and political instability. Following centuries of Ottoman rule, newly independent states such as Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Montenegro seek to expand their borders and assert their sovereignty, often at the expense of one another and of the crumbling empire that had once dominated the region. This struggle for territory and influence did not unfold in isolation; it became entangled with the rivalries of the great powers “Austria-Hungary, Russia, Germany, and Britain” each anxious to extend its own sphere of control in Southeastern Europe. The occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Austria-Hungary in 1908 lighted up the scene in Serbia and increased tensions across the continent, while the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 further destabilized the region by redrawing borders and deepening nationalist resentment. By 1914, the Balkans had become a geopolitical powder hotspot, where a single spark the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo would set off a chain reaction that immerse Europe into the First World War. Understanding the Balkan crises is essential to comprehend how nationalism and the pursuit of power disrupted diplomacy and peace, offering valuable lessons on how fragile the balance of international relations can be when ambition overtakes cooperation.



# Evolution of the Topic

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The Balkan crises evolved through a series of escalating events between 1908 and 1914 that transformed the political landscape of Europe and redefined the fragile balance of power. The first major turning point came with Austria-Hungary's annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908, a move that angered Serbia and Russia and revealed how nationalist ambitions could directly challenge imperial authority. Over the following years, the Ottoman Empire's decline created a power vacuum in Southeastern Europe, prompting newly independent Balkan states to compete for territory and influence amid growing regional tension.

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During this period, nationalism intensified as Serbia sought to lead a pan-Slavic movement, supported by Russia, while Austria-Hungary aimed to suppress these aspirations to protect its multiethnic empire. The Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 became a defining moment in this evolution: former allies turned into rivals as they fought to claim Ottoman territories, and the resulting territorial changes left deep resentment among the participants. These conflicts demonstrated both the strength of nationalist movements and the weakness of international diplomacy, as the great powers intervened to protect their interests but failed to establish a stable peace.

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By 1914, nationalist rhetoric had become increasingly radical, and the rivalry between Austria-Hungary and Serbia amplified by their respective alliances made large-scale conflict almost unavoidable. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo was not an isolated event but the culmination of years of political tension, militarization, and mistrust. The Balkan crises thus evolved from local disputes into a continental struggle for dominance, illustrating how unmanaged nationalism and great power rivalries can transform regional instability into a global catastrophe.

# External Actions

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The Balkan crises quickly drew the involvement of Europe's great powers, each seeking to preserve influence and prevent instability from spreading across the continent. The 1908 Bosnian Annexation Crisis, sparked by Austria-Hungary's takeover of Bosnia and Herzegovina, provoked protests from Serbia and Russia, forcing diplomatic mediation by Germany and Britain to avoid open war. Though temporary peace was restored, the episode exposed deep fractures in the international order and foreshadowed the growing failure of diplomacy.

During the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, major powers again attempted to intervene through the London Peace Conference. Britain led efforts to mediate territorial disputes, resulting in the Treaties of London and Bucharest. However, these agreements reflected the rival ambitions of the powers rather than genuine cooperation, leaving unresolved tensions and fueling resentment among Balkan states.

By 1914, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand revealed the limits of these external actions. The alliances meant to preserve stability instead accelerated mobilization and conflict. The great powers' inability to act collectively turned a regional crisis into a global catastrophe, demonstrating how fragmented diplomacy and competition for dominance undermined peace in early twentieth-century Europe.





# Committee Focus

The Historical Committee focuses on reexamining the Balkan crises to understand how nationalism, shifting alliances, and great power rivalries destabilized Southeastern Europe and contributed to the outbreak of World War I. The committee aims to explore alternative diplomatic, political, and strategic approaches that could have prevented the rise of the Balkan crises while preserving national interests and regional stability. Its work centers on analyzing the motivations of key actors—such as Austria-Hungary, Serbia, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire—and evaluating the effectiveness of international diplomacy during moments of crisis. The committee also seeks to evaluate the role of ideology, identity, and territorial ambition in shaping foreign policy decisions that led to widespread conflict. By fostering historical reflection and policy-based debate, the committee encourages delegates to identify lessons in negotiation, alliance management, and peacebuilding that remain relevant to modern international relations.

## KEY FOCUS STATEMENTS TO DISCUSS:

- Nationalism and its Role in Regional Instability
- Great Power Rivalries and Alliance Dynamics
- Diplomatic Failures and Missed Opportunities for Peace
- The Decline of the Ottoman Empire and Territorial Competition
- Strategies for Conflict Prevention and Balance of Power

# Conclusion

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The Balkan Crises exposed the deep instability that characterized Europe in the early 20th century. Fueled by nationalism, ethnic tensions, and the decline of the Ottoman Empire, the Balkans became a region of constant conflict and competing ambitions. The great powers particularly Austria-Hungary, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire viewed the region as a strategic arena to expand influence, turning local disputes into matters of international importance.

Despite multiple diplomatic efforts, including the Balkan Leagues and international conferences, peace in Southeastern Europe remained fragile. The failure to balance nationalist aspirations with great power interests led to repeated confrontations, each increasing distrust and militarization across the continent. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914 was merely the spark that ignited a conflict long in the making.

The Balkan Crises illustrate how nationalism, when combined with imperial rivalry, can destabilize entire regions and even the global order. Learning from this period is essential for current and future diplomacy: preventing similar conflicts requires dialogue, regional cooperation, and respect for sovereignty. By understanding the dynamics that once led to world war, nations today can work toward preserving peace and stability in areas still shaped by complex national identities and power politics.



# Countries Position

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**Germany:** Germany strongly supported Austria-Hungary as its main ally. During the Bosnian Crisis, Germany backed Austrian actions to preserve alliance unity and deter Russian intervention. Germany believed that showing strength would help maintain balance and protect its position in Europe.

**Russia (USSR):** Russia supported Serbia as part of its role as protector of Slavic nations. After losing influence in Asia, Russia aimed to strengthen its presence in the Balkans. It opposed Austro-Hungarian expansion and sought access to strategic routes and regional influence.

**USA:** The United States maintained a largely neutral position in Balkan affairs. While promoting peace and trade, it avoided direct involvement in European conflicts before World War I.

**United Kingdom:** The United Kingdom aimed to maintain stability and prevent any single power from dominating Europe. It supported diplomacy and international conferences to contain Balkan conflicts and avoid a large-scale war.

**Serbia:** Serbia promoted nationalism and Pan-Slavism, seeking to unite South Slavic peoples. It opposed Austria-Hungary's annexation of Bosnia and relied on Russia for diplomatic and military support. Serbia viewed expansion as essential to its national identity and security.

**Austria-Hungary:** Austria-Hungary viewed the Balkans as a vital region for the survival of its multiethnic empire. The annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908 was intended to strengthen imperial authority and stop the growth of Serbian nationalism, which threatened to inspire Slavic populations inside the empire. Austria-Hungary feared that nationalist movements could lead to internal instability and eventual fragmentation. As a result, it adopted a firm stance toward Serbia and relied heavily on German diplomatic and military support to preserve its influence and regional order.



# Countries Position

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**France:** France viewed the Balkan crises through the lens of alliance politics and its rivalry with Germany. As an ally of Russia, France supported diplomatic efforts that strengthened Russian influence and limited German and Austrian expansion. French policy emphasized maintaining the European balance of power and avoiding direct confrontation while remaining prepared for a larger conflict if diplomacy failed.

**Ottoman Empire:** The Ottoman Empire was in a state of political and military decline, struggling to retain its remaining Balkan territories. Nationalist uprisings and external pressures weakened Ottoman authority, especially during the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913. The empire aimed to preserve sovereignty and limit territorial losses but lacked the strength to compete with rising Balkan states and European powers. Its decline played a central role in destabilizing the region.

**Sweden:** Sweden maintained neutrality and sought to remain outside great power rivalries. Its foreign policy focused on preserving independence and regional stability.

**Norway:** Norway, recently independent in 1905, prioritized sovereignty and neutrality. It avoided involvement in European conflicts and focused on internal development and international recognition.

**Japan:** Japan, allied with the United Kingdom, supported the existing balance of power. Although geographically distant from the Balkans, Japan monitored European tensions due to their global implications and remained aligned with British diplomatic interests.

**Spain:** Spain remained neutral and focused on internal political stability. With limited interests in Southeastern Europe, Spain supported peaceful diplomatic solutions and avoided participation in great power rivalries related to the Balkans.

**Bulgaria:** Bulgaria sought to expand its territory and achieve national unification, particularly in Macedonia. Initially allied with other Balkan states against the Ottoman Empire, Bulgaria gained territory during the First Balkan War. However, dissatisfaction with territorial settlements led to conflict with its former allies during the Second Balkan War, increasing regional instability and rivalry.



# Countries Position

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**Slovenia:** Slovenia supported immediate independence from Yugoslavia. Unlike other republics, its conflict—the Ten-Day War—was brief, and Slovenia quickly gained international recognition. It distanced itself from the wider Balkan wars and focused on European integration after secession.

**Denmark:** Denmark followed a policy of neutrality, focusing on national defense and avoiding entanglement in alliance politics that could lead to war.

**Netherlands:** The Netherlands prioritized neutrality and the protection of international trade. It avoided military involvement in European conflicts and supported diplomatic approaches to preserve peace and stability.

**Greece:** Greece participated in the Balkan Wars to expand its territory and strengthen its position in Southeastern Europe. It aimed to secure strategic ports and protect Greek populations in disputed regions. While cooperating with other Balkan states against the Ottoman Empire, Greece remained wary of Bulgarian ambitions and prioritized its own national security.

**Italy:** Italy pursued a flexible foreign policy, balancing its alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary against its own ambitions in the Adriatic and Mediterranean regions. Italy supported actions that weakened Ottoman control and opened opportunities for territorial expansion. However, it remained cautious of Austrian dominance in the Balkans and prioritized its own national interests over alliance loyalty.

# Participation List

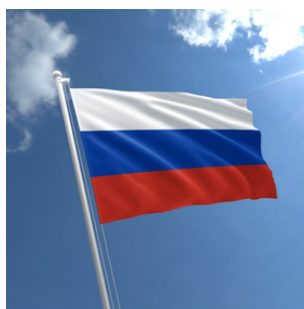
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Germany



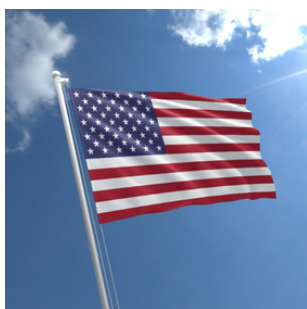
France



Russia



United Kingdom



United States  
of America



Canada



Poland



Hungary



China



Czechoslovakia



Austria



Denmark

# Participation List

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Spain



Sweden



Netherlands



Italy



Norway



Japan



Turkey



Greece



Yugoslavia



India



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