

Imperial Overstretch: Austro-Hungarian War Aims in the Western Balkans and the Problem of Albanian Neutrality, 1914-1916 – MARVIN BENJAMIN FRIED

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The ‘Long Peace’ before 1914, coupled with the codification of rights and responsibilities of neutrals through the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, gave hope that not only was war a thing of the past, but that if war did come then smaller European states would be able to protect themselves through the viable alternative of legal neutrality. This hope proved to be a falsehood. According to Nils Ørvik, neutrality in 1914 “was fully formulated and established and still the failure was almost complete. This elaborate legal structure, the result of painstaking efforts through many years, proved to be built on sand.”¹ As both the Central Powers and the Entente systematically ignored and outrageously violated the neutrality of small states such as Belgium and Greece, factors such as geostrategic position, wealth, prestige, and past relationships mattered little. Only through the joint, tacit acceptance by the two Great Power blocs that neutrality of a small state was in their own interest, as in the Dutch or Swiss cases, could neutrality be maintained, though both sides would vie for a benevolent form of it.

This paper looks at the most unstable region in 1914 Europe, namely the Balkans. On that peninsula, neutrality was an attractive option for many states which wanted to join a bloc when the expected outcome would most likely be favorable to them, as in the Rumanian and Bulgarian cases. But for smaller states like the young and weak Albania, neutrality represented the only viable option for survival in times of total war. Guaranteed by the Great Powers and assisted by an International Control Commission, this Albanian legal neutrality remained generally in force until Italy joined the Entente in 1915 and the country was dismembered between Italy, Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, and eventually Austria-Hungary. Only Austria-Hungary, whose desires to keep the Serbs from accessing the Adriatic Sea had helped establish the Albanian state in 1912 in the first place, attempted to maintain *de jure* Albanian neutrality until its own dissolution in 1918.

¹ Page 38, *The Decline of Neutrality 1914-1941*, © Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1971

Precisely for the same reasons that the Maartje Abbenhuis² points to Great Power willingness to uphold Dutch neutrality – geo-strategic position – Albania was unable to retain its independence. The regional Great Powers of Austria-Hungary and Italy vied for dominance in the Eastern Adriatic while they were still nominal allies, and then clashed when Italy turned on the Central Powers. Albania was the key to the Adriatic – Austria-Hungary’s naval lifeline – and therefore the best instrument to undermine Austria-Hungary’s Great Power status and conduct a successful campaign against it. As a result, both the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Ministry and army were obsessed with either continued existence of an independent and ‘neutral’ Albania under Austro-Hungarian protectorate as the diplomats desired or outright annexation as the military leaders pushed for. An independent, nominally neutral, and unified Albania was crucial for Austro-Hungarian policymakers as it secured their influence in the country, extended their reach beyond the Adriatic, and gave Montenegro and Serbia another hostile country with which to contend in their rear. As early as under Leopold Graf Berchtold, the first wartime Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister, Austria-Hungary attempted to secure the “continued existence of the international control-commission,”³ particularly in regard to Albania’s neutrality and integrity. Any attempts, the Foreign Ministry felt, which could be “perceived” as a “violation of Albanian neutrality” had to be “avoided.”⁴ This policy was maintained and strengthened even as the First World War reached its bloody climax and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy faced dissolution.

This paper is based on research conducted at the national archives in Vienna and Budapest on Austro-Hungarian policies towards the Western Balkans in the First World War. It will argue that although the government of Albania had collapsed due to internal factional fighting following the outbreak of World War I, Albanian neutrality continued to exist *de jure* while the two adjacent Great Powers – Italy and Austria-Hungary – were at peace and guaranteed it. When regional war did break out in 1915, even the outright military and diplomatic support for Albanian independence and neutrality by Vienna was not enough to halt the dismemberment of the country, creating a power vacuum that eventually sucked the Austro-Hungarians into the fray as well. Once broken by another Great Power (Italy), the neutrality of a state such as Albania’s

² Page 261, Maartje M. Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral: The Netherlands in the First World War, 1914-1918*. © 2006 Amsterdam University Press

³ Berchtold-Loewenthal, 31 Aug 1914, HHStA PA XIV 68

⁴ Berchtold-Pallavicini, 5 Sept 1914, HHStA PA XIV 66

could not be re-established in wartime, even as its supporters at the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Ministry pressed for just that. The allure of control, or of buying off other neutrals such as Greece by sacrificing defeated neutrals such as Albania, proved too inviting to resist, particularly for the various military commands. The paper will examine closely why Austria-Hungary and Italy had an interest in maintaining Albania's neutrality, and what changed when Italy decided for war.

The Albanian neutrality case study is a prime example of a state unable to ensure or even influence its own neutrality by force, diplomacy, or the trade of vital resources, and whose geopolitical position made control of the region vital. Understanding this hitherto under-researched subject will provide clues and insights about how far small states can count on benevolent Great Power support for retaining their neutrality in times of total war.