

Russia, Serbia and the West Redux

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In 1877-1878, Russia fought a war against Turkey to help its Slav allies, especially Serbia, throw off the yoke of the Ottoman empire. Russia went to war at a time when it was militarily weak, internally divided, and diplomatically isolated, and despite an official policy that emphasized retrenchment in order for Russian policymakers to concentrate their energy and resources on military, economic, and political reform under Russia's great reformist tsar, Alexander II. Why did Russia go to war on behalf of Serbia, and what does this case imply for the current crisis in Kosovo?

First, Russian panslav nationalists used new freedoms under the Great Reforms of Alexander II to incite the public to war. Mikhail Cherniaev, a retired Russian general who had led Russian colonial expansion in Central Asia, used a fake passport to elude Russian authorities and go to Serbia to lead its army against the Turks. The mass circulation press, partially liberated from censorship, spread inflammatory coverage of Serbia's war and printed graphic information about abuses heaped on Slav populations by their Turkish overlords. They also spread lies about Serbian victories in order to encourage Russian volunteers to join the Serb army. At the same time, civic activism by Slavic Committees in Russia brought unofficial medical, financial, and military aid to the war in Serbia. And hundreds of ordinary Russians, without official approval, volunteered to fight in Cherniaev's army.

Nationalist hysteria built up in Russia and the spilling of Russian blood in Serbia heightened sentiments for Russia to go to war to avenge Turkey's "wide, bloody streams, created from Christian blood." Pressure intensified on the Russian government to undertake decisive action and not act cowardly or be paralyzed at a time when its own society was undergoing unprecedented mobilization on behalf of "brother Slavs."

Second, Russia's domestic politics were in disarray, with policies not clearly formulated or adhered to, and with lines of authority and communication blurred. The tsarist government's resources were severely stretched by the challenges of reform, increasing discontent against autocracy, and the rise of terrorism. In this context, Russian panslav nationalists, especially those involved with diplomacy, made commitments to the Serbs and assisted their war efforts (including the sending of arms) without permission from the central government in St. Petersburg. This bolstered Serbia's resolve in its war with Turkey. When the Serbian army pushed beyond its own capabilities and found itself on the verge of decimation, Russian authorities felt compelled to intervene to prevent the utter humiliation of an ally and to reassert a modicum of authority in international affairs.

Third, before intervening, the tsarist government attempted a flurry of diplomacy with the western powers, including Austria, Prussia, and Britain, to resolve the Serbian crisis. Up to the last moments before war, the tsar and his closest advisers did not seem to favor a military option. But all attempts at diplomacy failed. The sense of helplessness, isolation, and humiliation in Russian policymaking circles--combined with heightened nationalism at home--made war an extremely compelling option. As many as 200,000 Russians died in that war, and Russia's costly victory led only to further humiliation when the great powers of Europe stripped it of its war gains at the Congress of Berlin in 1878. The war did not resolve the problem of Russia's unstable government, or the issue of Slavic liberation in the Balkans. These problems would eventually result in the catastrophes of World War I and the Bolshevik revolution.

Today Russian military weakness, internal political and economic disarray, and international isolation mimic the context of the 1870s. Then, as now, it is possible for a few highly motivated nationalists to alter the dynamics of Russian international behavior. For example, someone on Russia's reconnaissance ship on the Adriatic could decide to jam NATO signals or send anti-NATO intelligence to Serbia, forcing a NATO response and possibly escalating a conflict between NATO forces and Russia. Or, Russian nationalist paramilitary groups could substantiate what are presently only rumors of Russian volunteers in the Serbian army, and heighten the risk of Russian blood being spilt by NATO bombs. These possible scenarios could easily whip up nationalism inside Russia and build pressure on the Yeltsin/Primakov government to prove Russia is still a player in international affairs.

Finally, the 1877-1878 case implies that it is crucial for Russia to be involved in an international resolution of the Kosovo crisis. This is not to say that the U.S. should yield to Russian blackmail, for example, on more and undeserved IMF funds in return for Moscow's cooperation on Kosovo. Rather, in recognition its own important security relationship with Russia and the dangers faced by a weak Russian government potentially hounded by extreme nationalist agitation, western powers should give Russia a place of respect and visibility in negotiating a resolution for Kosovo. In turn, Russia must acknowledge (in a way that its mass press has not) the horrific humanitarian disaster that Serbia's policy has wreaked on the Kosovar Albanians, and be willing to contribute to an international military force on the ground, which is necessary to end the Kosovo disaster.

Ongoing U.S. attempts (including by Vice-president Gore and others) to explore the possibility of Russia's cooperation in a diplomatic solution to Kosovo should be welcomed. Russia is the only country that can represent the West in negotiations with Serbia while simultaneously allowing Milosevic to save face. At the same time, Russia's diplomatic role will stem the growing mass nationalist hysteria, perception of humiliation, and anti-American sentiments inside Russia. As history shows, a little nationalist hysteria can go a long way toward destabilizing Russia, causing it to act aggressively, and creating momentum for future disturbances to international peace and security.

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