

The Other Balkan Wars:

1914 Carnegie Endowment Report of the International Commission to Enquire into the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan Wars.

Introduction with reflections on the present conflict by George F. Kennan (Carnegie Endowment Book, Washington, 1993).

- reviewed by David Law for the spring 1995 issue of NATO's 16 Nations

So much has been written about the Balkans since the beginning of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia that potential readers could be forgiven for ignoring ***The Other Balkan Wars*** out of a sense of *déjà lu*. Yet this volume surprises with the novelty of its content and the poignancy of its message.

The Other Balkan Wars recounts the findings of an international commission established in 1913 by the Carnegie Foundation for International Peace to enquire into the alarming reports of aggression and outrage generated by this century's first Balkan Wars. Originally published the following year, it has been re-issued with an introductory essay by the celebrated American historian George F. Kennan.

Far too frequently in reporting on the fighting in Bosnia, the past is dispensed with by one-liners to the effect that "they are at it again". ***The Other Balkan Wars*** puts flesh on the typically bony references to Balkan history in contemporary commentary. In their report, the commission members, while making no claim to be exhaustive, take pains to give a systematic account of the wars' motivating factors, material costs and human suffering. Drawing largely on the first-hand experiences of combatants and civilians alike, they paint a picture of the folly of war which is more personal and easily as powerful as anything generated by television reporting on the current hostilities in the Balkans.

An entire annex is devoted to letters written by husbands and sons on the fronts to their loved ones. We read, for example, in the letter of a soldier to his family, this matter-of-fact confession - "They burn the Greek villages and we the Bulgarian. They massacre; we massacre." - followed by the salutation: "I embrace you tenderly".

Of course, the casts in the past and present Balkan Wars are not identical. The latest version has Serbs, Croats and Bosnians as its main protagonists. That of 1912 evolved from an anti-Ottoman liberation front of (essentially) Serbs, Bulgarians, Greeks, Montenegrins and Macedonians into a free-for-all war of conquest at

(largely) the latter's expense. Today's conflict in the former Yugoslavia can already be measured in years. Those of yesteryear were over in months, though themselves the opening salvos in Europe's first Great War. Chillingly, however, there is no hint of the apocalypse to come in the Commission's report - and this despite its being completed only six months before the Guns of August were to sound around the globe.

Kennan's essay, masterfully written, builds an effective link between past and present Balkan Wars, but like most of the analytical sections of the report, its usefulness lies more in renewing reflection on the dynamics of the current conflict than in enriching the debate about possible solutions.

And so the book may leave the reader with more unanswered questions and nagging doubts than it erases. Here are a few from your reviewer's list. To what extent do civilian populations share responsibility with governmental elites and regular armies for the outbreak of hostilities in the old and new Balkan Wars, and for the atrocities accompanying their prosecution? Do secret agreements and arrangements figure as prominently in the dealings among those involved today as they did in 1912-13? Will the ongoing effort by outside powers to contain the fighting and to moderate belligerents' behaviour prove any more successful than it did eighty years ago? Is the present conflict, as Kennan contends, really "primarily a problem for the Europeans", affecting "their continent" and not the multi-ethnic America?

Both Kennan and the commission members seem to sympathise with the notion that there is a Balkan mind-set of national megalomania, indelible grudges and bestial behaviour to which communities of the area can succumb whenever they are released from the containing grip of superior force. An alternative view - and to your reviewer's mind, a much more helpful one - sees the nations of the Balkans like those of any other region - as tolerant, peace-loving and good-neighbourly as any in fair-weather circumstances but capable of displaying the worst of human nature when sucked into the maelstrom of ethnic and religious violence. The age-old question - are all people people, or are some people not? - still goes to the heart of both outsiders' and insiders' Balkan policies - and this as much in the wars of the 1990s as it did in those of the 1910s.