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The Near East as a Factor in the European War

By Professor Albert Bushnell Hart, Ph.D.*

At a regular luncheon of the Club, held on the 8th February, Professor Hart said:

Mr. President and Gentlemen,—The "Near East," should we note the position of Toronto and proceed in a strict geographic manner, would at this moment be the United States. That Near East, however, is no factor in the European War. Still it is impossible for one of the Mid-Americans to come into the land of the North-Americans without remembering two occasions, in 1775 and again in 1812, when we made a proposal of marriage to Canada, but in both cases she replied: "I can be only a sister to you." (Laughter.) As a nephew, then, if you like, of the Dominion, it gives me great pleasure to see so many of my uncles. (Laughter.) The pleasure is greater because the subject upon which I have been asked to speak to-day is one which has made a deep impression upon my own mind, partly through long reflection, but still more because about a year ago I penetrated into the *sanctum sanctorum* of Turkey and was able to visit one after another those tough Balkan principalities, to see the Austrians, the Servians, the Greeks, the Montenegrins, the Bulgarians, the Roumanians, on their own soil; and to bring home certain deep-seated impressions, and beliefs as to the future.

James Russel Lowell once said, "Don't prophesy unless you know!" (Laughter.) I could not set up for a prophet, but I did say a year ago that there was so much dynamite centred about the Balkans that it was certain that an explosion would come within a short time. That explosion came sooner than people expected it; and from a torch lit in a city of Bosnia a flame flashed forth which involved Germany, France, England, Japan, Belgium, and threatens to involve still other

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nations and to bring on a great international, almost a world-wide war.

Surely no one needs to be reminded that there is a war. I see on the streets of Toronto men who expect soon to experience actual fighting, which if a man escapes never fails to leave its impression upon him for life! (Hear, hear.) But the remarkable fact, gentlemen, is that there is not a war going on, but two great international struggles, either one of which might have arisen by itself, either one of which must be submitted to the arbitrament of the sword, either one of which is of intensest interest to mankind. The first one is that which is nearest to us, the struggle between Germany and Great Britain, the stake in which is pre-eminence or superiority upon the sea, together with the control of colonies throughout the globe. Great Britain, partly by accident, partly by the quality of the nation, partly by its supreme capacity to adhere to that upon which it lays its hand—I am not speaking just now of the Revolutionary War (laughter)—Great Britain has made itself the Rome of our time. It has imposed upon great nations and great areas of the earth the Pax Britannica, a blessing to mankind! (Applause.) Now, that supremacy or superiority is questioned by Germany. It has been questioned in conferences and books and protocols for twenty-five years, and is at last contested in warships and with cannon.

I am not going to touch upon this western war, no matter how near and vital, partly because my own country is more or less involved, where two great military nations seek to carry each its point against the other. I will confine myself to the second, and almost as great war, which at this moment, while we are sitting quietly here, is raging in Poland. There they are hauling great guns, each side determined to press through. What are they fighting for? Is it Warsaw? Not in the least! It is Constantinople. (Hear, hear.) The second of these great wars, parallel to that in the west, is between Germany and Russia. The prize is not superiority this time, but supremacy, in whatever may remain of the Turkish Empire!

The two wars came simultaneously. They might have come at different times. It would have been greatly to the military advantage of Germany if these contests could have been separated. But it did not lie in the nature of things that they could be, because the interest of all the Great Powers in the Near East is almost as great as in the Western question.

I must confine myself to-day to a very brief outline of the reasons why there should be war, and why Germany and Russia should be the contestants. Whatever other results may

come, we may from the outset be sure that when the great peace is made there will no longer be an independent Turkey. (Applause.) The handwriting is on the wall: "The glory of the Turk is departed!" And we are sitting at this moment at the obsequies of one of the proudest, most successful empires of history.

Why should Constantinople be the object for which German soldiers are sent into the trenches to pour out their lives like water? "What's Hecuba to me, or I to Hecuba?" Germany is far from Turkey; they do not touch on the seacoast. A few years ago a line of German ships was started to ply from Naples to Constantinople, but they could not make it pay, there was not enough German trade to support it. Yet at this moment, in the Chancelleries of Germany, alongside the word "London" is written "Constantinople," in letters of fire; and the possession of either of these great cities would fill the German heart with exultation.

When in June, 1913, I made a visit to the Balkans, I went there as a scientific observer. I wanted to see what kind of thing a Balkan was. I arrived there just after the first peace had been signed between the peoples that had been at war. I visited all the Balkan countries except Albania, and particularly Servia, the country now in the furnace heat of affliction. We have been told, or at least the effort has been made to teach us, that the Servians are a kind of barbarians, who kill their own kings if they can not get at any one else's king. It must be confessed that the Servians have gone through an extraordinary amount of unwarlike fighting. The story is told of a teacher who asked a scholar to name the Servian sovereigns who had met with a natural death. The child began naming one and another who had been killed, and when stopped by the teacher replied, "Why, I thought for a sovereign king of Servia it was natural that he should be assassinated." (Laughter.) Nevertheless, the Servians are a good people, though very rude and uncultured; the kind of people we like, farmers, every one living on his own land. There are no great estates. They are a hard-headed, good-natured people, much like the French in character.

The Servians in 1913 had a great army. In 1885 they had been beaten in a campaign of a little more than five days by the Bulgarians, therefore nobody believed they could fight. But I soon came to realize it. I had the privilege of leading a Servian regiment for an entire day. They were noble fellows, and took cheerfully their imperfect accommodations, never faltered or hesitated, never a single man dropped out

of the ranks all day long. Perhaps I ought to explain that they rode on the coal cars which were proceeding south, while I rode in the only coupé in the train, and they didn't know I was there! (Laughter.)

From Macedonia I went to Bulgaria, and was there the second day after war broke out. By the kindly advice of a Bulgarian General whom I knew I managed to escape before the gates were closed, many travelers being obliged to stay. The Bulgarians have had a large part in the Eastern problem, though they have not as yet entered into this struggle. Bulgaria is not in itself an object of desire, for it is a mountainous country, a grain-producing country, and its people are cattle-raising farmers a poor but sagacious and dependable people. The Servians have no seaport, almost no towns, and only one city, Belgrade—alas! no longer a city.

The reason why the Balkans are involved in the struggle is simple: they are "on the road to Mandalay!" If you take a pencil and draw a line from Hamburg on the North Sea to Canton on the coast of China, along the most practicable railway route, that line must pass through Berlin, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Sofia, Constantinople, Baghdad, the cities of the Persian Gulf, northern India, and so to Mandalay. Over this route most of the railway lines will be ultimately built.

For some twenty or twenty-five years, it has rested in the minds of German statesmen that their country had come to a point of world importance; and that to participate in world advantages, they must have a merchant marine. So they built a splendid fleet of merchant ships. Then it must have a navy, and notwithstanding the protests and objections of their near neighbors, that a powerful navy would be incompatible with friendly relationships, they set about building one. They must have colonies, so that the fleet could protect them. But Germany was about a century too late: the English had picked up the most valuable spots. As George Washington said about his Western lands: "It was not to be supposed that those who were first on the ground would fail to secure the most eligible locations." (Laughter.) The Englishman was on the ground first. But the Germans took possession of Kiao Chou—or Tsing Tau, as the town was called, the other name being applied to the district. If you read about the place in German periodicals you would be led to suppose this was the greatest seaport on earth. But if you were to visit it, you would find that as a port it is far inferior to the port of Toronto (laughter)—undoubtedly a great port. Alongside the port is a little town, with not more than ten thou-

sand people, including the garrison. The Germans and the Chinese are on good terms, so much so that the Germans won't allow the Chinees to stay in the town during the night. (Laughter.)

Creating a great port there was like building a great port in Canada at the point of Prince Edward Island. It is not a natural centre for exchange of goods from vessels to rail. The possession of Tsing Tau gave a new point to the Near Eastern question. The Germans argued, "We want to get to the sea. We have a right to such. The English have two routes to the Far East, one by way of the Suez Canal and the other around the Cape of Good Hope; Russia has an overland route to the Pacific by rail. Should not we have one, too?" There is only one land road from Europe to the East, and that leads through the Balkan peninsula and Constantinople.

The difficulties were enormous. First of all, that road must thread the Turkish Empire. Accordingly, about 1890 Germany began to cultivate "the Sick Man of Europe," and the German Embassy at Constantinople became the ganglion of the Turkish Empire. Good advice emanated in copious fountains from that source. Turkey took anything that meant political advantage to her, and rejected anything that meant trouble and annoyance. (Laughter.) Now, came the German Emperor himself to Constantinople, figuratively slapped the Sultan on the back and told him what a good fellow he was, and said, "By the way, some of my people want to build a railway to Baghdad." The Turk asked, "How much is there in it for me?" (Laughter.) Gentlemen, I was not there, and do not claim that this is a verbatim and correct account of what was said, any more than the account of my remarks to-day which the reporters are putting down. (Laughter.) Yet it would seem that something like this was said, judging by the effect, for the railway was built to Kornich, and the concessions were obtained. Next came the question of the Baghdad stretch, which was under construction last year, and eventually will be finished and occupied. Of course that was a commercial, not a political, venture. Politics, however, was at least interwoven. If you are in Constantinople and look up to the hill of Para, you will see one of the most majestic and imposing buildings constructed in Constantinople in a century. That building is the ganglion of the Empire; from that centre emanates the good advice, which the Sultan Follows. When Germany undertook to help in the reorganization of the Turkish army a few years ago she undoubtedly

gave a sort of promise to help the Turks to remain in Turkey.

The German plan of reaching the Farther East seemed to be moving. We must face the fact that it is impossible for any alien country, such as Germany, to acquire the desired influence without taking some of the country. In Asia Minor the ultimate settlement was postponed, because the English and French received concessions for building other railroads in there. At this point Russia comes in. That country lies bottled up, as all the world knows, like a huge retort with four small mouths: one on the White Sea, one on the Baltic, one at Vladivostock on the Pacific, and one on the Black Sea. Three of these mouths are practically sealed up, congealed, in winter, so the natural road for the Russians into the world is over the Black Sea, and through the Bosphorous, the Sea of Marmora, and the Dardanelles. For two centuries, ever since about the time of Peter the Great, the Russians have been pushing first of all to gain the territory on the north of the Black Sea; then gradually to acquire the whole north and east coast; then to push rapidly towards Constantinople. In 1878 Russian banners actually waved in sight of those towers which in 1453 had been broken down when Constantinople fell into the hands of the Turks. From that vantage they were pushed back. Bismarck, Disraeli and Salisbury thought they had settled the question at the Congress of London when Disraeli said, "I bring you peace with honor." He brought peace and honor, but not a settlement; it was simply a prolonging of the fitful fever of life for Turkey.

The Russians must get to the open sea. Why, imagine the imperial domain of Canada brought within two hundred miles of the Atlantic, within fifty miles of the Pacific, and within thirty miles of Hudson Bay, without touching either. It is perfectly clear that the young giant would burst the bonds. So these hundred and sixty millions of Russians must have an outlet to the sea, and no force known to mankind, in the long run, will prevent it! (Hear, hear.) There was a force, a combination of France and England, which in 1854 prevented it for a time. But Great Britain no longer resists it. It is useless for such a colonial power, having ports all over the world, to stand in the way of another which is seeking for a single way out to the ocean. I have the idea that neither Great Britain nor France will enter any further objection to Russia obtaining Constantinople and putting her vessels and fleets upon the Ægean.

Thus we arrive at the heart of the present trouble. If Germany is going to build a railway through Asia Minor and

eastward through Turkey and Persia, and Russia is going to come down through the Bosphorus to the Dardanelles, just how are these two powers going to live in amity, when their great prize must be Constantinople? Great Britain and France desire it not; Germany and Russia desire it intensely. The Turks are aware of this irrepressible conflict; they know that they must be either hammer or anvil; on the whole they would rather be a part of the hammer of Germany which is striking upon the Russian anvil.

The Balkans—how are they connected with this issue? In a simple manner: the whole attitude of the Germans toward the Turkish Empire involves in the long run the colonization of Asia Minor by the Germans, and also depends upon the possession of a railway line through the Balkans from Belgrade to Constantinople. That is why the war broke out in 1914 instead of in 1915 or 1916. As to the opening action of Servia, the assassination of the heir to the Austrian throne, he was murdered, but not by Servians. His assassins were the subjects of Austria, and residents of Bosnia, an Austrian possession. Now the Austro-Hungarian Empire is made of a great variety of races. So is Canada. So is the United States. I suppose there are as many languages talked in the Balkans as in Toronto. (Laughter.) But Canada and the United States worry little about races. No matter what country or race a man comes from, he comes to this country as a guest. As a guest he must be obedient to the laws and support the government. If he wishes to become a citizen, he must then and there abjure allegiance to any other sovereign, "particularly His Majesty X.Y.," and thereafter he is a Canadian. No foreigner or group of foreigners can claim any special exemption or status or privilege because of belonging to any particular race. How is it in Austro-Hungary? There people speaking fifteen different languages are grouped within one empire. There half a dozen different nationalities harbor. If you are a Magyar you are in a different relation to the Empire from what you would occupy if you were a Bohemian or a Croatian or a Dalmatian or a Galician. All are subjects of the Austrian Empire, and it is held to be right from the point of view of the Austrians, that the minority of the Austro-Hungarian people—the Germans and Hungarians, shall govern the majority, who are mostly Slavs, and shall continue to do so indefinitely.

Much was said to us at the beginning of this war as to the tremendous battle between the Slav and the Teuton. The war has gone on long enough for us to realize that there is no

such struggle. The Germans have lived on amicable terms with the Russians for a hundred and fifty years. Between Austria and Russia there has never been a national war. Those people got on very comfortably together. The real issue and cause of the war was over the question whether the Magyars, in their half of the empire, should subject to their will the Slavs of that half. That is, whether it is a right and proper principle of government to keep great groups of people within a system which they dislike and abominate.

The Servians took advantage of the manifest uneasiness among the Slavs in Hungary and thought it was their chance to win them over. The Hungarians recognized that their rule was in danger. They appealed to the Germans for aid. The Austrian Government sent to Berlin the inquiry what Germany would do, if Austria were in danger, to support it. The information was conveyed back, that the German Government would support Austria.

And one of the main elements of German interest was that Austria's long arm was the one to reach down to the Balkans, and to open up the route through which the missing railway link should be completed. In order to bring that result about, Austria must first possess the Balkans. It is almost five centuries since the Turks came sweeping up, conquering one after another Christian State, and yet the submerged people had preserved their national feeling. I can testify as to the very strong individual and national feeling of the peoples of the Balkans. Montenegro, for example, is one of the tightest little countries in the world, and abounds in large-hearted, good people. Then there are the Bulgarians, with their army; the Servians; the Macedonians; the Greeks. The aim of all was simply to drive the Turks back till they held nothing except Adrianople and Constantinople. That splendid achievement was possible only by hard fighting in 1912. The Balkan army were the first, except the Boers, to find out the military value of deep trenches. The Servians and Bulgarians buried themselves in these trenches and lay there for days.

In order to get to Contsantinople via the Balkans, Germany would have to conquer all those people, and there are fifteen millions of them. I asked a Bulgar General how many Bulgarians were in the field in June, 1914. He said six hundred thousand, including transportation service, which would be four hundred thousand soldiers. Yet that country had just passed through a war in which it had lost not less than a hundred thousand men, out of five or six million people. They were again raising 600,000 men, which is not less than ten per cent. of the whole population of Bulgaria.

The only people who have not accepted the Servian control are the Albanians. I shall never forget a mental snapshot I got of the Albanians one day: I asked a man why the Servians did not like them. He replied: "There is an Albanian. He has a gun. You have a button on your coat. He wants the button. He shoots you, and takes that button." (Laughter.)

The Germans, in order to gain their object, must defeat fifteen millions of exceedingly bellicose people, in a highly strategic country, who, you may believe, will perish to a man before they will admit the supremacy of Germany! (Applause.) I think I am equally justified in saying that every one of the Balkan countries would perish before it would admit the supremacy of Russia. They don't want any masters. (Applause.) All they want is individual independence, with the right of cutting the buttons from each other's coats. (Laughter.)

These elements of the present contest in the Near East are combined with the nature of the expiring Turkish Empire. Practically everybody that goes among the Turks comes away with the feeling of admiration and personal attachment to individual Turks. You might ride all over Turkey, and you would find the Turks with their families in their gardens, with their children around them. In fact the Turks themselves think they have the finest social system in the world. There is little talk of the high cost of living when a man never need buy his wife a new dress; she wears the costume of her great-grandmother! (Laughter.) The ladies never go anywhere. They stay at home. Of course they want Papa to stay at home, too, and entertain his family. They are a fine people, and the Turkish soldiers are good fellows. But somehow when you get a hundred, or a thousand, or a million Turks organized into a State, you have one of the worst governments in the world. This is curious, because the greater number of the Turks are really Europeans. The Turkish Empire started with sixty-five men, and combined with other elements of original European stock were a great number of Greeks. Nevertheless the so-called Turks are perfectly infused with the Aisatic system of government, in which the only right is that of brute force.

When the Sandwich Islanders saw people whip horses to make them go faster, they thought if you only whipped them hard enough you could make them fly like the wind. So it has been with the Turkish government of Christians. Talking with a Bulgarian friend, I asked him about a certain good road, bordered with fine trees, crossing Bulgaria. He said Mohar Pasha planted those trees, and a few years after, when passing, some one told him that they were cutting down those trees for fuel. He called out a body of men, and counted them off,—one, two, three, down to ten, and the tenth man was shot; so on to the twentieth, and he was shot. "Now," he said, "you leave my trees alone!" (Laughter. That is the Turkish theory of government. I would it had not been the theory also adopted by some other nations, who hold that you can do anything by war, if you have force enough. (Applause.) The idea that the way to conquer a people is to put proclamations upon the wall and shoot those who ignore them, is essentially the Asiatic theory of government. (Applause.)

Here then we have the Turks, trained in war since 1912 by German officers, who tried to apply a scientific system. They turned out a great many officers and put in new men; the result was that when they came to the Balkan campaign of 1912 not one of the Turkish armies bore the brunt; they were beaten in every battle in the open field, because the men didn't understand and hadn't confidence in the officers. Every army was broken and never reassembled. Now they are reorganized, but anyone who has been there knows that there is no sufficient concerted action, and no sufficient accumulation of stores and transportation, on land and water. I heard great tales of the retreat after the defeat in Macedonia, unrepeatable tales. Over long stretches you might see little heaps of uniforms, whose soldiers had sunk down and died. That apparently is what is likely to happen to Turkey again. Splendid material, one of the conquering races, and at one time the best artillerists in Europe—their lack is organization, system. The one man who apparently makes the decisions is Enver Pasha, now alive apparently because he shot and killed his superior officer, Nazim Pasha.

Gentlemen, here, in a nutshell, is the question of the Near East: there is a tremendous prize at stake: the forces of Germany and Austria are divided because of the western war, so only half of their armies are available to combat the Russians. Russia may be able to conquer or at least to repel all these armies sent against her. In that event we shall see the extinction of one of the world's great empires. When that empire perishes, what will take its place, and what should a neutral people like the United States prefer? The continuance of the so-called Turkish Empire under the suzerainty of a European Power cannot solve the problem. The absolutely inevitable solution of the Near Eastern question is the possession of Constantinople by the Russians. (Long and hearty applause.)