Captive States, Divided Societies: Political Institutions of Southeastern Europe in Historical Comparative Perspective

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John Gledhill is completing his Ph.D. in Comparative Government at Georgetown University. His dissertation looks at the development of political violence during regime change in the Balkans. Specifically, John examines the strategic use of anarchy as a tool of political violence during Romania’s transition. John has been the recipient of grants from the American Consortium on EU Studies, Institutul Cultural Român and has been a visiting scholar at the New Europe College, Bucharest.

Some relevant publications:

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Charles King is Chair of the Faculty and Ion Ratiu Associate Professor in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, with a joint appointment in the Department of Government. A former Marshall Scholar, he has worked as a research fellow at New College, Oxford, and as a research associate at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London.

Some relevant publications:

Violence in the Balkans

Violence in the Balkans is commonly thought of as somehow “pre-modern.” This view is due, in part, to popularized depictions of the Balkans as a kind of barbarian, “time-capsule world…in which people raged [and] spilled blood” (Kaplan, 1993). But more rigorous treatments of violence in the Balkans have also argued that, over time, violence on the Peninsula has been qualitatively different to war in western Europe; in contrast with “modern” contests between Weberian states in the West, collective violence in the Balkans is seen to have developed where informal organizations competed for dominance within weak states, or when contract enforcement alternatives were needed in the absence of a functioning state.

But the history of violence in the Balkans is not merely one of conflict through state weakness or state failure. Rather, collective violence on the Balkan Peninsula has just as often grown out of “commercial” agreements, struck between stable governmental authorities and private violent organizations. These arrangements can be seen as a kind of government contracting of
violence. Where contracting emerged, it fed out of a governmental belief that the material and political costs of leasing violence would be lower than the price of extending direct state central control over all violent functions. When seen this way, certain episodes of violence in the Balkans over the past two centuries more closely reflect contemporary trends towards contractor-run war, than some kind of pre-modern, stateless barbarism.

In this chapter, we look at violent contracting in the Balkans, from the late 19th century, onwards. In addition to challenging the perception of Balkan violence as “pre-modern,” we work towards two conclusions concerning the role that contracting played in the era of Balkan state-formation. First, during the late Ottoman period, contracting served as a mechanism for conflict resolution and contract enforcement during a period of political and institutional diversification. The employment of warlords as borderland arbitreurs at this time provided the Ottomans with a means of perpetuating imperial control in the peripheral regions of empire, even while power at the center weakened. Second, as Ottoman control subsided, newly independent Balkan states also engaged in third-party contracting (sometimes even hiring Ottoman troops). Rather than undermining efforts to monopolize violence within the new Balkan states, the organizational steps associated with the development and maintenance of contractor relations served to indirectly shape and solidify independent state capacities.

We will open by looking broadly at the history of violence in the Balkans, treating those cases of violence that either stemmed from excessive state strength or a complete absence of the state. The focus on governmental contracting of violence will then follow. The argument will be illustrated through cases studies of two contracted groups, the Circassians and the Komitadji.

Draft Chapter Structure

1. Introduction
2. Violence as a function of state or institutional weakness:
   - The role of shifting institutional arrangements--empire and regime change -- in creating space for actors to fill the void sometimes left by the absence of a clear state authority.
   - Brief examples, e.g., Macedonia in 1908, Bosnia in 1914, Albania in 1992.
3. Violence as a function of unbounded state control:
   - Treatment of communist terror across the region, eg. Gheorghiu Dej in Romania
   - Instances of overt, state-run ethnic homogenization, e.g., the Ustashe during the Second World War
4. Violence through private contracting:
   - Conceptual overview
   - Case study 1: Circassian warlords as borderland arbitreurs (1860-1914)
   - Case study 2: Komitadji movements in Macedonia (1895-1935)
   - Brief discussion of further cases: Ali Pasha in southern Albania, Četa movement.
5. Conclusions
   - The myth of “pre-modernism”
   - Private contracting as a form of state-building
   - Overview of applications of the model to the post-communist Balkans (Romania 1990, Serbia 1991-94).
Case study I: Arbitrage and Violent Subcontracting: The Circassians and "Bashi-Bouzouks"

Warlords can be seen as uniquely gifted boundary-crossers, conducting economic, political, and at times violent transactions across political, cultural, and economic frontiers. Despite the persistent image of warlords as sword-slinging barbarians ruling despottiically from illegitimate thrones, the really successful ones have been successful because they had something that everyone wanted: the ability to serve as middlemen in complex transactions across uncertain boundaries. In this way, warlords have been parasitic on the modern state, not an alternative to it. Warlords and their troops need the state, since it provides those basic conditions necessary for the warlord to play the role of arbitreur: borders, tax regimes, and contentious relationships with other states. At the same time, the state benefits from having warlords act as negotiators who can carry the threat of violence to border regions in which it would have been excessively costly to assert direct state control. There are numerous examples of this behavior in the history of the twentieth-century Balkans, Anatolia, and the Caucasus. This case study will focus specifically on the case of the Circassians: an ethnic group removed by the Russian empire from the Caucasus in the 1860s and then subcontracted as violent entrepreneurs throughout various parts of the Ottoman empire up until 1914.

Case Study II: Contracting and State-building: the Komitadji Movements, 1895-1935

Groups known as “komitadji” could be found right across the Balkan Peninsula during the later Ottoman period, but movements using the name were concentrated in Bulgaria from the late 19th Century and operated from there until the late 1930s. While the Bulgarian state only peripherally acknowledged their relationship to the groups, the Sofia-based “Central Committee of Internal Organization” openly employed these guerrilla/bandit units between 1895 and 1935. The group was apparently contracted to promote Macedonian autonomy, by attacking targets in Serbian-Macedonia. The komitadji and their voyevod leaders were initially brought in to handle the task for two reasons. First, the international legitimacy costs associated with an open violation of state borders would have been excessively high for the freshly independent Bulgaria - particularly after its loss in the Balkan War of 1913. Second, the material costs of mobilizing state forces for an extended, albeit low-level, conflict could not be easily met by a state whose mechanisms for enforcing tax collection were still in their infancy. By allowing the komitadji to collect rents off their targets, material costs incurred by the state would be kept to a minimum.

Although this contracting did see the nascent Bulgarian state sacrifice its early monopoly on violence, the cooptation of the komitadji did not undermine the state-building project in Bulgaria. Rather, the administrative processes tied to subcontracting actually served to consolidate the state, as they mimicked the mechanisms of state tax raising and administrative consolidation that are ordinarily by-products of the construction of a state military. The komitadji acted outside of direct state control, but state security forces were used in coercing membership, and the state provided a range of material and military resources to the organizations. Over time, the sophisticated state fund-raising mechanisms that were needed to support the komitadji fed back into a strengthening of Bulgaria’s state capacity. This strength, in turn, allowed Bulgaria to develop the military capacity necessary to disband the komitadji, whose members were then absorbed by the Bulgarian military – a move which further expanded and consolidated the Bulgarian state.
Methods and research steps

Field research for the case study of the komitadj i will be primarily conducted by John Gledhill, during the summer of 2006. In aid of this project and work for his doctoral dissertation, John will be visiting Macedonia, Bulgaria, Serbia, Albania and Romania. Archival work on the activities of the komitadj i in the Dobrogea region of Romania and Bulgaria will be conducted, which will complement secondary investigations in Skopje and Sofia.

The case study on “warlords as arbitreurs” will be handled by Charles King, who has already conducted much of the research necessary through earlier field trips to the region. Materials gathered in aid of his book The Black Sea: A History and a forthcoming work, The Ghost of Freedom: Politics, Violence, and Memory in the Caucasus, will provide the empirical basis for his treatment of “warlords as arbitreurs.” Research conducted for his various works that have engaged violence under communism will act as an empirical basis for our look at violence as a function of a deeply pervasive state.