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## Prelude to the Great War

In the years preceding the two great conflicts of the Twentieth Century Europe was on the brink of war more than once, pushed there by the expansionist ambitions of the great Powers, their industrial, naval, and military interests, the surge of nationalism, the obsessive fear of encirclement and the temptation of pre-emptive war. Each crisis was averted through the caution of seasoned, realist statesmen, and the reluctance of large sections of the public, often the majority, to let itself be led by hot headed minorities. In the end, political and diplomatic negotiation managed to resolve the crisis in a flurry of exchanged notes, drum rolls, secret agreements and public statements, the complex mechanisms of unwritten understandings. The compromise held until the next crisis.

If there was no war, neither was there peace. Each successive crisis left residual traces in the public memory, sharpened by emotional and often sensational media coverage (the CNN factor in an earlier form), and by internal political factors. Such memories were cumulative, with the compromises becoming more intolerable to public opinion than the conflicts they had averted. People were increasingly mesmerized by the notion that war was inevitable but could be limited, and would re-confirm the principles and ambitions that had from time to time been invoked to justify political and diplomatic action. The progressive and irreversible weakening of the Ottoman Empire had intensified the rivalry among the Powers—as the main protagonists of the politics of Europe were fearfully referred to—over the Balkans, strategically

positioned with access to the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, the Europe of the Danube, and the South-East. The dangerous instability of the Balkans directly involved Europe in a turbulent area divided by frontiers that were often in dispute, riddled with revisionism, and tormented by conspiracies and conflicts.

The Albanians found themselves suddenly free from Ottoman domination just as the rest of Europe trembled on the edge of the great European conflagration. A patchwork of clans, different religions and ethnic groups occupied real estate that the Powers had designated a sovereign principality and entrusted to a German prince, Wilhelm of Wied. The Albanian factor fitted awkwardly into Balkan politics, and the reasons were many. They ranged from the backwardness of the population to their adherence to ancestral customs, to their continued ties with Constantinople, to the tribal structure of their society, to their religious and ethnic differences, and finally the rivalry with areas that had once formed part of the Albanian nation. Independent Albania emerged in this climate.

The presence of military and naval forces from the European Powers, the delicate regional balance, and the prickly relations among the Prince of Wied's European advisers, like the rivalry and the antics of the various Albanian tribal leaders, has for us an uncanny topical flavor, recalling events in the major newspapers and the television news from the same region of Europe, the Balkans, so close yet so foreign.

The postcards (actually news photographs) sent by the Marquis of San Giuliano, minister of foreign affairs for the kingdom of Italy, to his daughter-in-law during those anxious months between April and September 1914 show us the Albania which the Prince of Wied was expected by the Powers to transform from a former Turkish province into a "vital and progressive" European state. The images are a vivid record of the dramatic events of the prince's six-month reign, the insurrections, betrayals, the outbreak of the European war, and the consequent decline of interest in the little Balkan principality in the Adriatic, the end of the reign as Albania sank back into the morass of tribes, clans, beys and armed gangs.

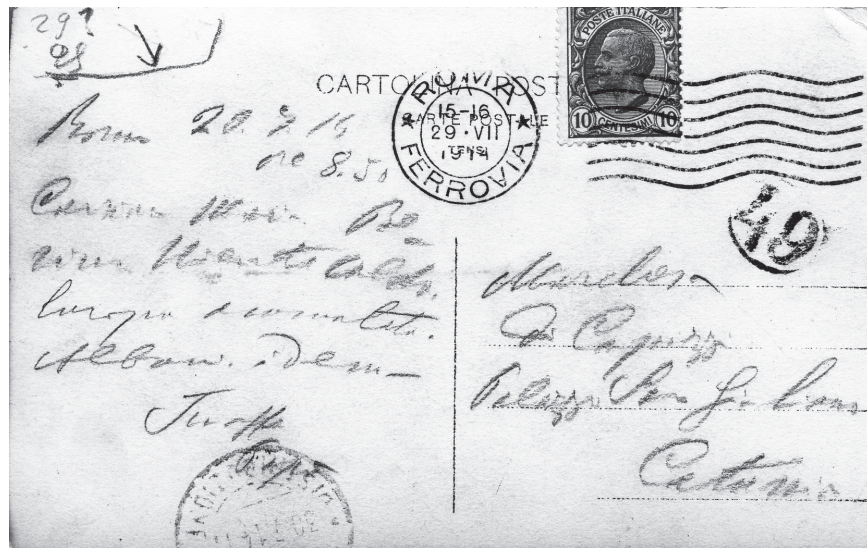
The Balkan war had re-drawn the peninsula at great human cost. Nationalism had been victorious on the edge of Europe. The war had destroyed "Turkish Europe," replacing it with a Slavic threat to Austria-Hungary that was causing concern in Vienna. Italy and Austria-Hungary faced off in the region, but had to set aside their rivalry to collaborate in Durrës, the Prince's capital, each with the intention of giving life to an Albania that would not be within the other nation's sphere of influence, but would be "vital and progressive." Despite this common purpose an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and hostility prevailed between Rome and Vienna, the result of Italian irredentism and Austrian myopia, complicated by the Slavic factor, and Hungarian *hubris*.



Minister of Foreign Affairs Antonino Paternò Castello, Marquis of San Giuliano.

The growing instability in Europe and the storm that was scudding down on the whole continent, made the Albanian situation even more complex forcing the Powers—particularly Austria-Hungary and Italy, whose strategy was already very difficult—to be engaged in a continuous exercise of diplomatic and political fine tuning that tried the patience of government ministers towards their representatives in Albania. Despite the disputes, the open antagonism, the intrigues against each other and against the Prince of Wied, the often dubious loyalty of the officials in country and the intelligence agents, Rome and Vienna tried to the very end to preserve the agreed plan for Albania, preferably without undermining their own separate long term intentions.

Looking at the events of those six months now, with the horrors of the more recent Balkan conflict still fresh in the memory, becomes cinematic: a difficult exercise in flashbacks and flash forward. The photographs sent by San Giuliano to his daughter-in-law, the dispatches and editorials in the newspapers of the time, the diplomatic documents review-



Reverse of postcard sent by the Marquis of San Giuliano to his daughter-in-law.



ing progress or sending instructions to ambassadors, resurrect a distant and unreal world, rendered more remote by the grand period uniforms, the Turkish-style fezzes worn by the Albanians, the bearded dignitaries, the *redingotes* and *turqueries*, the horses, adventurers, and women. Also, sadly, the batteries of artillery, the piles of corpses lying in shallow graves, the lines of refugees, the guerrillas and the troops in battle formation, public opinion inflamed by demagogic speeches, the reassuring international conferences. But is it so remote after all? Much of it seems recognizable from what we have seen and read in the past few years, in our time, without the fancy uniforms and the Oriental costumes that make the Prince and the pashas distant figures.



Maria Paterno' Castello, Marchioness of Capizzi,  
to whom the postcards were addressed.

Historians explain the political objectives behind the Powers' decision to invent a European state where there had been no European state, to create a police force and a judicial system, a parliament, and even the glimmerings of a foreign policy. A remarkable multi-national collaborative effort—more geopolitics than benevolence, but nonetheless a huge undertaking—was directed at bringing stability and a viable public structure to the principality: which is another link with the present day.