

Negotiating Balkan Alterity

Representation and Knowledge of Southeast Europe in the Work of the Balkan Committee¹

Abstract: The Balkan Committee was founded in London in 1902 in response to growing British concerns about unrest in the European provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Its key objective was to monitor local events and inform the British public about regional developments. The Committee claimed to be a hub of valid, reliable, and expertly processed knowledge about the region. In this paper I attempt to reconstruct how the members of the Balkan Committee interpreted political developments in Southeast Europe and how they circulated knowledge through various British social organisations. I show that the knowledge disseminated by the Balkan Committee was a resource that fuelled and mobilised British public opinion and political and economic interest in the region. At the same time, the efforts of the Committee members resonated with their historical and social anxieties: the better they understood the Balkans, the better the chances of avoiding a European conflagration in particular, and the easier they would be able to facilitate the progress of the local population in general. I argue that the Balkan Committee framed the information and facts at their disposal in accordance with British travel writing traditions, which fundamentally influenced the way they represented the Balkans.

Keywords: British liberalism, Eastern Question, Balkans, political activism, travel literature

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Balázs Balatoni, University of Szeged, Department of Modern History and Mediterranean Studies, Szeged Egyetem u. 2., Hungary, balatonibalzs@gmail.com

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It was a cliché among various British authors at the turn of the twentieth century that a considerable part of Southeast Europe was still a *terra incognita*. The geographically and culturally distant Balkans were often compared to Africa or Afghanistan, which, despite their European location, were considered better known than the former. The need for useful knowledge about the region was recognised by some interest groups as crucial at a time when the Balkans were becoming a buffer zone between clashing great power interests and small-state nationalist rivalries. In this context a Balkan Committee was set up in London in 1903 with the purpose of collecting and disseminating reliable information on the prevailing situation in Ottoman Macedonia and the Balkans in general. How did the Committee contribute to the accumulation of knowledge about the Balkans? From where did its members gather knowledge and what cultural predispositions influenced their understanding in describing it?

One of the first historians of the Balkan Committee, Leften Stavrianos, claimed that although the organisation played an important role in Balkan politics in the pre-1914 era, there was much to be discovered about its history.² This historiographical void was only filled in the twenty-first century, when research revealed the complexity of this British lobby group.³ The current strand of historiography, the history of knowledge, offers an opportunity to investigate the Committee's contribution from a fresh perspective. The questions outlined above can be answered by analysing the group's repertoire of representations, which involves investigating not only the intellectual origins of its value-laden but historically relevant approach to regional problems, but also the "public arenas" and the medium through which it reached its audience. In the process, the knowledge that the Balkan Committee sought to disseminate was transformed and interacted with these public spheres. Most importantly, by creating an emotional connection between a considerable part of British society and the 'suffering Balkan Christians', it became a tool for political mobilisation. The Balkan Committee's rather forgotten position in historical memory, however, can be interpreted in relation to what Philip Sarasin claims about the nature of knowledge: it is subject to becoming socially irrelevant and forgotten.⁴

2 Leften Stavrianos, The Balkan Committee, in: *Queen's Quarterly* 48/3 (1941), 258–267, 258.

3 See most recently James Andrew Perkins, *British Liberalism and the Balkans, c. 1874–1925*, Ph.D. thesis, Birkbeck College, London 2014; Samuel Foster, *Yugoslavia in the British Imagination. Peace, War and Peasants before Tito*, London/New York/Oxford 2021; Balázs Balatoni, *Home Rule for the Balkans? The Idea of International Control in Ottoman Macedonia in the Writings of the Balkan Committee (1903–1908)*, in: Krzysztof Popiek/Michał Balog/Kamil Szadkowski/Agnieszka Ścibior (eds.), *Crossroads of the Old Continent. Central and Southeastern Europe in the 19th and 20th century*, Cracow 2021, 87–108, 95–99.

4 Phillip Sarasin, *Was ist Wissensgeschichte?*, in: *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der Deutschen Literatur* 36/1 (2011), 159–172, 164–165.

In the first section of the paper, I will trace the influences that determined the Balkan Committee's approach. The second section focuses on how it gathered information about the region, and, more importantly, how, as an intermediary, it became an agent and distributor of knowledge about Southeast Europe in Edwardian Britain.

Travelling and travel literature

Throughout the nineteenth century, travel literature was the most important medium of knowledge about the Balkans in Great Britain. In an era of European colonial expansion, travel accounts were extraordinarily popular. Imperial expansion on far-away territories around the globe went hand in hand with the beginnings of mass tourism, driven by the technological innovations of the age. This led to a proliferation of publications written by authors with highly diverse agendas, approaches, and social backgrounds. Since the foundation of the British Royal Society in the seventeenth century, travel for the purpose of acquiring "useful knowledge" had held a certain appeal for British authors and readers alike.⁵ Nevertheless, as Peter Burke points out, travelogues were rarely composed exclusively of spontaneous reactions and purely empirical evidence.⁶ Travel literature tends to reflect its author's preferences, social standing, cultural preferences, personal feelings, etc., and as a literary genre it has its own internal generic characteristics and representational strategies or 'epistemological decorums'.⁷ Suffice to say that travel literature profoundly determined the framework of how authors negotiated Balkan alterity, and, at the same time, attempted to underpin their credibility with their audiences.

The eighteenth-century British painter Joshua Reynolds once claimed that if one wished to paint the portrait of a king, then one must be guided by the concept of royalty.⁸ This also seems to apply to British travel writing about the "Near East". Since the publication of Edward Said's groundbreaking work *Orientalism* in 1978, international scholarship has produced a great deal of new insight into the relationship between travel literature and the production of knowledge and images.⁹ In the case

5 Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing*, London/New York 2011, 45–52.

6 Peter Burke, Útmutatás az utazástörténet számára [Directions for the History of Travel], transl.: Kármán Gábor, in: *Korall* 26 (2006), 5–24. Originally published in: L. M. Andersson/A. Jansdotter/B.E.B. Persson/Ch. Tornbjær (eds.), *Rätten. En Festskrift till Bengt Ankarloo*, Lund 2000, 176–198.

7 Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 2011, 72–86; Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth. Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England*, Chicago/London 1994, 202–211.

8 Cited in Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity. Chapters in the History of Ideas*, London 1990, 41.

9 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York 1978.

of the Balkans, a series of consecutive studies over the past decades has shown how a supposedly superior West “imagined”, encountered, and negotiated an atypical East: the in-betweenness of the Balkan Peninsula.¹⁰ In their writings, travellers to the Balkans placed the region outside the imaginary boundaries of the “West”, and tended to describe it in part in terms of the assumed qualities of “the East”.

The Balkan Committee produced its texts in accordance with the British tradition of travel writing, and they grasped alterity in their analysis, reflecting the religious, cultural, and political tropes of the time. In doing so, the Committee entered the public arena out of a geopolitical necessity, namely the Eastern question, and claimed to possess relevant knowledge to solve the conundrums of the Near Eastern problems. Yet, the knowledge the Committee conveyed to the British public was not entirely scientific in the strictest sense. The Committee’s geographic, ethnographic, and political observations fuelled political activism to raise awareness and sympathy for the Christians of Macedonia, and to open up the country to European economic penetration, which they regarded the best means of “bringing civilisation” to the region and thereby eliminating the threat to European peace posed by the Balkan question.

The Balkan Committee

British engagement with Southeast Europe before 1914 can best be understood through the lens of the imperial politics of the period. In the “age of questions”,¹¹ the omnipresent Eastern Question decisively shaped the way in which British policymakers and public opinion looked at the crumbling Ottoman Empire and its former domains in the Balkans. Nevertheless, the wider region did occasionally, and by no means independently from the trajectories of international politics, become the subject of intense public interest. The nineteenth century brought about an exponential growth in the publication of various accounts on the Ottoman Empire and the Balkans, a process which gained momentum with each crisis of the period. As the century progressed, the focus of interest shifted according to the fluctuations of public

10 Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford 1997. See also Eugene Michail, *The British and the Balkans. Forming Images of Foreign Lands, 1900–1950*, London/New York 2013; Andrew Hammond, *The Uses of Balkanism. Representation and Power in British Travel Writing 1850–1914*, in: *The Slavonic and East European Review* 82/3 (2004), 601–624; Vesna Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania. The Imperialism of the Imagination*, London 2013.

11 Holly Case, *The Age of Questions. Or, a First Attempt at an Aggregate History of the Eastern, Social, Woman, American, Jewish, Polish, Bullion, Tuberculosis, and Many Other Questions over the Nineteenth Century, and Beyond*, Princeton/Oxford 2018.

interest and British imperial concerns.¹² However, after the famous “Bulgarian Horrors” campaign led by William E. Gladstone during the Eastern Crisis (1875–1878), attention finally moved to the European provinces of the Ottoman Empire and to the newly formed Balkan states.

Despite a long tradition, ranging from Lord Byron’s participation in the Greek War of Independence to the liberal-radical enthusiasts of the Edwardian period, the Balkans, and especially the territories that still belonged to the Ottoman Empire, were trapped in a transitory place on the British mental map: they were regarded as a place where Europe did not yet end, but where the Orient began.¹³ Travellers never failed to emphasise that they were not only crossing political and geographical borders, but leaving “civilisation” behind. Alexander Kinglake’s phrase in 1844, that at Semlin (now Zemun in Serbia) he was about to leave the “wheel-going Europe” and “see the splendour and havoc of the East”, was duly echoed in later British accounts.¹⁴ Sixty years later, Mary Edith Durham, in her much-cited book *The Burden of the Balkans*, wrote: “Passports were inspected on the Hungarian frontier, as restored on leaving Semlin. [...] West Europe faded away like a dream, and I plunged into the Near East and the whirlpool of international politics.”¹⁵ Similarly, in one of his early writings about the Balkans, the founder of the Balkan Committee, Noel Buxton, argued that “three days’ travelling will take one out of Europe and into ‘the East’, while a six weeks holiday permits a visit to Albania, a country almost as unknown as Afghanistan.”¹⁶ He did not fail to emphasise that although the region was geographically part of Europe, once one left the Danubian plains one was undoubtedly entering “the East”.¹⁷

Another peculiarity of British travel accounts, including those of the Balkan Committee, in describing the “otherness” of the region is temporality. Since “the East” was generally regarded as a stagnating and unchanging, and therefore timeless, entity, the Balkans, as part of the “Nearer East” in the terminology of British authors, was also seen as a place where historical time had been stopped by Ottoman conquest. One of the secretaries of the Balkan Committee, William Arthur Moore (1880–1962), notes that after the Battle of Kosovo in 1389:

12 Margarita Miliori, *Ambiguous Partisanship. Philhellenism, Turkophilia and Balkanology in XIXth-century Britain*, in: *Balkanologie* 6/1–2 (2002), 127–153.

13 Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania*, 2013, 6; Ryan Gingeras, *Between the Cracks. Macedonia and the “Mental Map” of Europe*, in: *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 50/3–4 (2008), 341–358.

14 A. W. Kinglake, *Eothen*, Edinburgh/London 1896 [1844], 1.

15 M. Edith Durham, *The Burden of the Balkans*, London 1905, 86.

16 Noel Buxton, *Freedom and Servitude in the Balkans*, in: *Westminster Review* 159/5 (1903), 481–490, 481.

17 *Ibid.* Cf. “To cross the Turkish frontier was always an event. It marked the boundary of European civilisation”, Noel Buxton, *Travels and Reflections*, London 1929, 54.

“The swords fell, the clock stopped, time rolled on in Europe, but not in the Balkans; whence it comes that if anyone wishes to project himself back into the Middle Ages he need not strain at Sir Walter Scott nor swallow Mr. H. G. Wells. The Orient express will whirl him there in three days.”¹⁸

Henry Noel Brailsford (1873–1958), a radical journalist and member of the Committee, similarly observed that in the Balkans centuries did not follow one another but rather coexisted.¹⁹

From the last quarter of the nineteenth century, most textual accounts of the Balkans tended to follow a Gladstonian agenda²⁰ to grasp the problems of the peninsula, which eventually made the discourse around it in Britain an almost exclusively liberal matter.²¹ From the late 1870s, British liberals were inclined to see foreign policy partly as a moral issue. This strand of British thought had its origins in the abolitionist movements and the new evangelical revival of the first half of the century, and culminated in the liberal campaign against the Conservative Disraeli government.²² Like-minded followers regarded Britain as the principal guardian of the weak and oppressed, and considered social injustice as an outrage against their own moral code. In this sense, the Balkans, and especially Macedonia at the turn of the twentieth century, not only served as a “dissenting” foreign policy cause, but as one that resonated with domestic and international questions which were interwoven in the liberal mind of the era.

The publications of the Balkan Committee tended to adopt a somewhat novel strategy of providing readers with reliable information rather than mere entertainment. Nevertheless, the texts were still largely constructed and authenticated by travel

18 W. A. Moore, *A Note on the Balkan Countries and the Origin of the “Balkan States Exhibition, 1907”*, in: *The Balkan States Exhibition, 1907*, Earl’s Court, London, S.W.: Official Programme, Guide and Catalogue, London 1907, 16.

19 H. N. Brailsford, *Macedonia. Its Races and their Future*, London 1906, 1. Cf. Enika Abazi/Albert Doja, *Time and Narrative. Temporality, Memory, and Instant History of Balkan Wars*, in: *Time & Society* 27/2 (2018), 239–272; Andreas Lyberatos, *Time and Timekeeping the Balkans. Representations and Realities*, in: *Entangled Histories of the Balkans*, vol. 4: *Concepts, Approaches, and (Self-)Representations*, Leiden 2017, 257–290.

20 In essence, Gladstone’s legacy was support for nationalities, an express of moral outrage against the Turks, and a strong conviction that the Concert of Europe was entitled to intervene on behalf of Christian populations or enforce its will in the Near East.

21 Diana Mishkova, *Beyond Balkanism. The Scholarly Politics of Region Making*, London/New York 2018, 18–25.

22 D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Britain. A History from 1730s to the 1980s*. London/New York 1989; A. J. P. Taylor, *The Trouble Makers. Dissent over Foreign Policy 1792–1939*, London 1969, 62–119; Noel Buxton in fact embodied these formative influences. Buxton’s great-grandfather, Thomas Fowell Buxton, was the leading politician of the British abolitionist movement, while his father was an ardent Gladstonian until 1886. Buxton’s family and its network included numerous individuals who took a keen interest in social reform and humanitarian activities (often inspired by their non-conformist religious beliefs). Mosa Anderson, *Noel Buxton. A Life*, London 1952, 17–21.

accounts, which were considered eyewitness reports to ensure the credibility of the authors. Before 1914, there were hardly any educational or scientific institutions in Britain in which institutionalised research into the Balkan could have taken root.²³ Therefore, knowledge about the Balkans was largely produced by individuals who were recognised as authorities due to their personal accomplishments or social standing in British society, and who had travelled extensively in the region. Throughout the ‘long nineteenth century’, the most important sources of information were diplomats stationed in the area; however, their observations rarely reached a wider audience outside the walls of the Foreign Office at Whitehall. By the time the Balkan Committee started its work, non-governmental actors, for example journalists, travellers, and academics, began to claim a more influential role in transmitting knowledge and shaping images of the perceived reality of the Balkans through their personal experiences.²⁴ For instance, not only did *The Times* correspondent James David Bouchier (1850–1920) report regularly on the political situation in the Balkan countries, but the fact that he had travelled extensively up and down the region and established contacts with high social and political circles, made him the best choice for the editors of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* to write entries on various Balkan-related subjects.²⁵

The Balkan Committee integrated different approaches to address “Near Eastern problems”.²⁶ The founder of the Committee, Noel Buxton, first visited the Balkan Peninsula in 1899 on the advice of his doctor to “cure an affection of the throat by a visit to sunny lands”.²⁷ After subsequent travels to various parts of the peninsula and studying its problems, he decided to approach friends who might be sympathetic to the idea of forming a committee devoted to the cause of Christians still living under Ottoman rule.²⁸ The foundation of the Balkan Committee was announced on 28 July 1903. The *Westminster Gazette* reported that the

23 R. W. Seton-Watson, *The Origins of the School of Slavonic Studies*, in: *The Slavonic and East European Review* 17/50 (1939), 360–371; Michail, *The British and the Balkans*, 2013, 39–40.

24 Michail, *The British and the Balkans*, 2013, 11–12, 29.

25 Bouchier wrote entries for the 11th edition on Macedonia, Balkan Peninsula, Bulgaria, Greece, Crete, and Albania.

26 On the Balkan Committee non-exhaustively see: Stavrianos, *The Balkan Committee*, (1941), 258–267; H. N. Fieldhouse, Noel Buxton and A. J. P. Taylor’s ‘The Trouble Makers’, in: Martin Gilbert (ed.), *A Century of Conflict 1850–1950. Essays for A. J. P. Taylor*, London 1966, 175–198; R. B. McCormick, Noel Buxton, the Balkan Committee and Reform in Macedonia, 1903–1914, in: Nicholas C. J. Pappas (ed.), *Antiquity and Modernity: A Celebration of European History and Heritage in the Olympic Year 2004*, Athens 2004, 151–166; Perkins, *British Liberalism and the Balkans*, 2014, 102–215.

27 Buxton, *Travels and Reflections*, 1929, 49.

28 It is a common assumption in the literature that the foundation of the Committee was due to the Macedonian uprising of 1903, which started on 2 August (20 July O.S.). However, evidence suggests it started its work much earlier than this date. Victoria de Bunsen, Charles Roden Buxton. A Memoir, London 1948, 54–55; F. W. Pethick-Lawrence/Joseph Edwards (eds.), *The Reformer’s Yearbook* 11 (1905), 181; *Daily News*, 29 June 1903, 7.

“primary aim of the committee is to promote a real understanding of the present condition of European Turkey, and to reawaken that public interest in the fate of the Balkan peoples which is demanded alike by the claims of humanity and by the responsibility which our country assumed in the Treaty of Berlin.”²⁹

In fact, the Committee embodied a set of interconnected socio-political interests which appealed to mostly liberal and liberal-radical political and civil activists. Beyond echoing the popular stir of Gladstone’s great propaganda campaign of the 1870s, critics of imperial and social injustice tended to find their place under the umbrella of the Balkan Committee.

Shortly afterwards, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation incited the Christian population of the Macedonian vilayets to rebel against Ottoman rule. The *Ilinden* uprising quickly stirred the Western conscience, which unsurprisingly gave a boost to the public recognition of the Balkan Committee. As a result, the organisation started producing leaflets, raising questions in Parliament, and organising public meetings across the country in support of the Macedonian Christians. Throughout the autumn of 1903, more than 200 meetings were held under the auspices of the Balkan Committee, and a relief fund was set up to alleviate the suffering of the Macedonian people.³⁰

From the outset, the main aim of the Balkan Committee was to recruit prominent and influential members whose opinions could not be disregarded by either the British government or public opinion. The Committee’s first president, James Bryce (1838–1922), was a veteran Gladstonian with a lifelong interest in the fate of the Ottoman Christian populations.³¹ Besides his political career, Bryce was an acknowledged author of international law and of various historical studies. His presence easily prompted others, for example Brailsford or the historian William Miller (1864–1945), to consider joining the lobby group.³² Buxton’s family connections also played a considerable role in the Committee’s growing membership, which included the leaders of various religious communities throughout the country. What is more, several Anglican bishops lent their name to the resolutions and publications circu-

29 Westminster Gazette, 28 July 1903, 4.

30 Pethick–Lawrence/Edwards (eds.), *The Reformer’s Yearbook*, (1905), 181; The Macedonian Relief Fund entrusted H. N. Brailsford and his wife, Jane Edson Malloch (1874–1937), and the soon-to-become expert on Albania, Edith Durham, to organise the relief work on the ground in Macedonia. Their experience of humanitarian work also provided the material for their influential books, published on their return to Britain. See: Brailsford, *Macedonia*, 1906; Durham, *The Burden of the Balkans*, 1905.

31 Anderson, Noel Buxton, 1952, 33.

32 Noel-Buxton Papers, McGill University Library, Rare Books and Special Collections [henceforth: NBP] MS 951 c.1/17 ‘Special Correspondence’: Lord Bryce 1902–1922: James Bryce to Noel Buxton, 20 July 1903.

lated nationwide by the Committee.³³ In this sense, the Balkan Committee was truly the heir of the Gladstonian Bulgarian Campaign, as it was a manifestation of the British religious and liberal conscience that found a metaphor in the Balkans for discussing imperial and domestic issues in Great Britain.³⁴

In sum, the Balkan Committee claimed to be a hub of reliable and precise knowledge about the Balkan Peninsula. The way in which its members addressed the political and cultural landscapes of the region bore a considerable resemblance to the representational strategies of earlier travel accounts, which incorporated and reproduced long-standing stereotypes and expectations in the guise of civilisational asymmetries. On the other hand, the Balkans mattered for Edwardian liberal-radical political activists because they could be linked with domestic political concerns. The somewhat romanticised depiction of the Balkan rural Christian populations and small productive agrarian holdings stood in stark contrast to the appalling urban poverty of industrialised Britain and the question of land tenure in the British countryside, to name but one example.³⁵ In the next section, we explore what kind of information hierarchies the Balkan Committee utilised and how the organisation managed knowledge circulation before World War I.

The informants of the Balkan Committee

As mentioned in the first section of this paper, the Committee's main source of knowledge was personal experience and the tradition of antiquarian travel writing. At the same time, the need for constant sources of information forced the Committee to rely on an extensive network of local informants in the domains of the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, there is a tendency in the writings of the Balkan Committee to hierarchise these accounts according to their "trustworthiness", which was decided arbitrarily by Committee members from the metropole. They gave preference to Western diplomats and residents in Turkey over local informants, because they were inclined to think that the five hundred years of "Asiatic" Ottoman rule had corrupted the moral standing of Balkan Christians.

33 In a letterhead listing the main officials of the Balkan Committee, the bishops of Birmingham, Durham, Hereford, Liverpool, Stepney, and Southwark were mentioned as being associated with the work of the organisation. NBP MS 951 c.24/5 'Balkan Committee – Miscellaneous I': Notes [undated].

34 James Perkins, *The Congo of Europe. The Balkans and Empire in Early Twentieth-Century British Political Culture*, in: *The Historical Journal* 58/2 (2015), 565–587.

35 See James Perkins, *Peasants and Politics. Re-thinking the British Imaginative Geography of the Balkans at the Time of the First World War*, in: *European History Quarterly* 47/1 (2017), 55–77, 58–62 and Foster, *Yugoslavia in the British Imagination*, 2021, 25–45.

Due to the social status and the notorious fame of their organisation, Committee members were often received by Western diplomatic representatives and Balkan monarchs alike.³⁶ While the latter often saw this as an opportunity to influence British opinion in their own favour, local British consular officers did from time to time assist the Committee. In general, however, the Foreign Office and the Consular Services were eager to contain and divert the Committee's involvement in Near Eastern affairs, regarding its activities as an uninvited interference in Britain's official diplomatic business.³⁷

“Local European residents” were seen as another important source, whose reliability the Committee vouched for. These were mainly newspaper correspondents such as Bouchier and Philip Graves of *The Times*, or Sir Edwin Pears, the doyen of the British community in Constantinople, who also reported for the *London Daily News*. Different religious missions, mainly American, operating in the Ottoman Empire also provided the Balkan Committee with news. A considerable part of the Balkan Committee's membership shared a similarly keen interest in the fate of the rural Armenian population. American and British missions in Asia Minor regularly reported on local developments, including requests for funding for girls' educational institutes.³⁸

Local informants who could have been “cross-cultural brokers” rarely appear in the Balkan Committee texts, and usually only in a victimised and marginalised role.³⁹ In most cases, especially after the 1903 uprising in Macedonia, the local population was merely a symbol of the unbearable nature of the ‘Asian’ and ‘despotic’ rule of the Ottomans. A. J. P. Taylor aptly noted that British liberals were more concerned with rebuking the Turks than with liberating the Christian population.⁴⁰ Moreover, revealing the identities of local informants might have jeopardised their personal safety. Edward Boyle, another lifelong associate of Noel Buxton and the future chair-

36 Frederick C. Giffin, James David Bouchier, in: *The Historian* 27/1 (1964), 1–20, 3.

37 NBP MS 951 c.8/2 Autobiography – Balkan Reform. In his unpublished autobiographical draft, Buxton recalls an occasion when a delegation of the Balkan Committee visited Constantinople after the Young Turk Revolution. “British diplomacy was not in sympathy with our cultivating the Young Turks, but though our Ambassador, Sir Gerard Lowther, was aware of this, but he was very civil, offered us the use of the Embassy's pleasure boats, and entertained us in our large number at dinner.” Perkins, *British Liberalism and the Balkans*, 2014, 151. Nevertheless, the relationship between the Foreign Office and the committee members was far from amiable.

38 For example NBP MS 951 c.24/7 ‘Balkan Letters’ 1900–1908, E. Cantlow to Noel Buxton, 31 July 1908.

39 It is worth comparing this notion with the various accounts of Edith Durham, who was rather unsympathetic towards the refugees she helped under the auspices of the Balkan Committee in Ochrid during the winter of 1903–1904. For a collection of Durham's articles see M. Edith Durham, *The Blaze in the Balkans. Selected Writings, 1903–1941*, eds. Robert Elsie/Bejtullah Destani with an introduction by Elizabeth Gowing, London/New York 2014, especially 17–23.

40 Taylor, *Trouble Makers*, 1969, 71.

man of the Committee, wrote a letter to Buxton suggesting that he correspond with certain individuals in Macedonia and Albania in order to gain a better picture of the nature of the Young Turkish regime. These included local bishops and headmasters, along with consuls of neighbouring countries. However, in a note on the letter, Buxton wrote that “Turks would open every letter, so this would inflict punishment (if they wrote the truth)”⁴¹

In addition to this consideration, locals were often disregarded on account of their unreliability. Lacking the mastery of the local languages, most British travellers had to rely on (or the Ottoman authorities assigned them) a translator and armed escort (dragoman) to communicate with the rural Macedonian population.⁴² Few members of the Balkan Committee had sufficient knowledge of the multitude of languages spoken in Ottoman Macedonia. While Brailsford and Bouchier had a reasonable knowledge of Greek and Bulgarian, and Aubrey Herbert, for instance, was also fluent in Albanian and Turkish, the Buxtons and most of their close travel companions and political comrades lacked any substantial understanding of the languages spoken there.⁴³

In a pamphlet discussing the views of the pro-Bulgarian Buxtons during World War I, the war correspondent Crawford Price argued with remarkable perspicacity that it was misleading to rely on locals because “the traveller has almost invariably toured the country in tow of a dragoman of one or other of the races, and has assimilated the ideas of his guide rather than divined the nationalism of the people”⁴⁴ It seems to confirm what Larry Wolff writes about other British experts, such as Seton-Watson and the South Slavs or Aubrey Herbert and the Albanians, that the Balkan Committee subordinated, interpreted, and translated the voices of their protégés in their accounts.⁴⁵

Taking all this into consideration, the Balkan Committee can be seen as a curator between the political, ethnographic, geographical and economic knowledge of the Balkans and British society. In 1905, James Bryce, then acting president of the

41 NBP MS 951 c.1/13 Spec. Corr.: Sir E. Boyle 1910–1944, Boyle to Buxton, 23 June 1911.

42 Cf. Buxton, *Travels and Reflections*, 1929, 61–62.

43 However, Noel Buxton’s diary reveals that he started to learn Bulgarian before the establishment of the Committee. NBP MS 951 c.28/1 Balkans–1900–1915. Notes; Stefan Troebst, *Makedonien als Lebensthema*. Henry Noël Brailsford (1873–1958), in: id., *Zwischen Arktis, Adria und Armenien. Das östliche Europa und seine Ränder. Aufsätze, Essays und Vorträge 1983–2016*, Köln/Weimar/Wien, 2017, 100–110, 106; Lady Grogan, *The Life of J. D. Bouchier*, London 1926, 20; Margaret Fitzherbert, *The Man Who Was Greenmantle. A Biography of Aubrey Herbert*, Oxford 1985, 48.

44 NBP MS 951 c.25/6 Balkans Jan.–Jun. 1915, Crawford Price, *The Intervention of Bulgaria and the Central Macedonian Question*, n.p. 1915 (booklet).

45 Larry Wolff, *The Western Representation of Eastern Europe on the Eve of World War I. Mediated Encounters and Intellectual Expertise in Dalmatia, Albania, and Macedonia*, in: *The Journal of Modern History* 86/2 (2014), 381–407, 384.

organisation, stressed that it offered expert opinion to anyone interested in Balkan affairs. He noted:

“Every one of the writers has a direct first-hand knowledge of the subject. Every one of them has travelled in the country and has reflected upon the difficulties of the problem. The articles contain the data necessary for mastering the subject, and will give the English reader a mass of information which, I venture to believe, he will find nowhere else stated so clearly, so concisely, so carefully, and so fairly”.⁴⁶

The way in which the Committee represented and disseminated knowledge about the ‘Near East’ is reminiscent of what Kapil Raj shows in relation to nineteenth-century Central African exploration.⁴⁷ Similar to Raj’s observations, the Balkan Committee employed a number of strategies to reach a readership, using the press to generate sympathy or outrage for their cause and support for their activities.⁴⁸ However, unlike Raj’s examples, the Committee’s activities were genuinely private enterprises: travels were not funded by any scientific or government institution, but by membership fees and private allowances.

The circulation of information relied mainly on two domestic networks: first, the Liberal Clubs, initiated by W. E. Gladstone in 1882, and the religious and/or workers’ associations throughout the country. A letter concerning the publication and distribution of a Balkan Committee pamphlet on Macedonia shows that some 6,342 copies were distributed by various church organisations and the Liberal Clubs, and additional 7,000 copies were sent out through the network of the *Working Men’s Club* and the *Young Men’s Christian Association* alone.⁴⁹ It is interesting to note that, despite the relatively large number of female activists within its ranks, the Committee apparently failed to involve and cooperate with the more radical feminist organisations, as women suffrage remained a divisive issue among its membership throughout the period. *The Women’s Liberal Association* – the official women’s branch of the Liberal Party – did, however, support the Balkan Committee’s efforts on a national level to raise the necessary funds for its many activities.⁵⁰

46 James Bryce, Introduction, in: Luigi Villari (ed.), *The Balkan Question. The Present Condition of the Balkans and of European Responsibilities*, New York 1905, 1–15, 2.

47 Kapil Raj, *Relocating Modern Science. Circulation and the Construction of Knowledge in South Asia and Europe, 1650–1900*, New York 2007, 207–208.

48 Ibid.

49 NBP MS 951 c.24/3 ‘Balkan Committee 1903–1910’; G. D. O’Donnel to Noel Buxton, 15 August 1908. The following organisations were also mentioned in the letter: Baptist Association, Church of England Men’s Societies, Congregational Churches, Liberal Clubs, Free Church Secretaries, P.S.A. Societies.

50 *The Western Daily Press* (Bristol), 28 September 1903, 10; Andrew Hammond emphasises the importance of the Balkans in shaping modern British female identity. Most notably since the travels

As a result of the Committee's efforts, the Balkans may well have become more familiar to an otherwise indifferent section of the British public. In the immediate aftermath of the *Ilinden* uprising of 1903, numerous similar associations, partly at the instigation of the Committee, appealed to the Foreign Secretary, Lord Lansdowne (1900–1905), urging the government to intervene more actively on behalf of the Macedonian Christians, which was precisely the position of the Committee members.⁵¹ Despite their efforts to present themselves as experts and thus disguise the religious overtones of their campaigns, they inevitably played to the emotions of their religious audiences, which was a truly Gladstonian heritage. The constant reflection on imperial and domestic social policy issues in relation to the Balkans enabled the Committee to appeal to a socially diverse section of British society because most of its audience could easily project themselves onto what mattered to them, be it the terrain of high politics, religious compassion, self-determination, or the question of women's rights, for instance.⁵² Nevertheless, as James Perkins has pointed out, the reluctance of the Balkan Committee's leadership to involve the broad networks of trade unions and workers' associations more effectively in its activities later proved a major obstacle to expanding their influence.⁵³

In addition to political mass mobilisation, the Balkan Committee generally based its activities on the publication of reports in various forms and lengths, depending on the objective. Year after year, the Committee circulated its annual report, which summarised the prevailing situation in European Turkey, particularly in Macedonia, and gave an account on the expenditures and activities of the Executive Committee. However, the information it gathered from the region was also of interest to more traditional knowledge institutions such as the Royal Geographical Society. In a lecture to the Society, Noel Buxton presented the geographical features of the Rhodope Mountains, including flora and fauna, altitude, industry, and ethnographic observations (often infused with Orientalist notions) such as the spatial distribution of the various ethnic groups in the area.⁵⁴ Buxton argued that although "the Balkans peninsula [was] once the centre of civilisation, is now largely a terra incognita", and,

of Paulina Irby and Georgina Muir Mackenzie to Bosnia in the 1870's, female authors played a significant role in moving the focus from antiquarian interest to the customs and arts of the local populations. Hammond argues that late Victorian women travellers were more likely to identify with other oppressed social groups. Andrew Hammond, *Memoirs of Conflict. British Women Travellers in the Balkans*, in: *Studies in Travel Writing* 14/1 (2010), 57–75, 57–59.

51 There is a box full of such letters in the National Archives in London: FO 96/183; however, the Committee was heavily criticised in the columns of the *Daily News* for not doing more than occasionally sending letters to the press or organising mass meetings. *The Daily News*, 12 September 1903, 6.

52 Perkins, *British Liberalism and the Balkans*, 2014, 110.

53 *Ibid.*, 154.

54 Noel Buxton, *Balkan Geography and Balkan Railways*, in: *The Geographical Journal* 32/3 (1908), 217–234.

despite its relative geographical proximity, “the mountains of Africa are more often climbed than those of Albania.”⁵⁵ At the same time, Buxton was keen to impress potential British investors and businessmen by portraying the wider Balkans as a region rich in raw materials waiting to be exploited.⁵⁶

One of the most significant undertakings of the Balkan Committee to bring the region into the ambit of British trade was the initiation of the Balkan States Exhibition of London at Earl’s Court in 1907. While the idea of such a large-scale event originated from the associates of the Committee, its organisation required the involvement of other actors.⁵⁷ Initially, the main organisational tasks were taken on by the London Exhibition Company, which was usually responsible for the various exhibitions held at Earl’s Court.⁵⁸ In the end, only three Balkan countries – Serbia, Bulgaria, and Montenegro – decided to present themselves in London. The purpose of the exhibition was, apart from providing “Londoners an unfamiliar and picturesque pageant”, to give potential British investors and entrepreneurs the necessary knowledge about business opportunities in the Balkan countries.⁵⁹ Noel Buxton and other members of the Committee genuinely believed that establishing economic ties would result in the advancement of British political influence in the Balkans.⁶⁰

The exhibition catalogue⁶¹ lists various scenes from Serbia, Bulgaria, and Montenegro, including art (statues, paintings), various products of local craftsmanship, and, of course, the agricultural and economic productivity of each country. The various exhibits and scenes visually embodied the knowledge that the Balkan Committee wished to transmit as examples worthy to be emulated and, in a sense, by “bringing the Balkans” to London, it popularised the region among a wide audience.⁶² While

55 *Ibid.*, 217–218.

56 *Ibid.*, 232–233.

57 Moore, *A Note on the Balkan Countries*, 1907, 16.

58 Jill Steward, “The Balkans in London”: Political Culture and the Cultural Politics of Exhibition at Earl’s Court 1906–1908, in: *Études balkaniques* 44/4 (2008), 64–89, 64. It is interesting to note that among the honorary experts behind the exhibition were a large number of (ex-)colonial officials and officers, such as Lord Wenlock, Governor of Madras, Sir Frederick W. R. Fryer, Lieutenant-Governor of Burma (1897–1903), Sir John Kirk, Special Commissioner to Niger Coast (1895), or Sir William Robinson, ex-Governor of Hong Kong (1891–1898); Honorary Advisory Committee, in: *The Balkan States Exhibition*, 1907, 8–9.

59 Moore, *A Note on the Balkan Countries*, 1907, 17.

60 Tatjana Koprivica, Montenegro and International Exhibitions in the Second Half of the 19th and early 20th Century, in: *130 Years of Established Diplomatic Relations between Montenegro and Great Powers after it Gained Independence in 1878*, Paper Collection, Podgorica 2011, 245–269, 260. Cf. MS 951 c.24/11 *Balkan Letters*, 1916–1919, Draft of letter to Lord Crewe, 21 July 1919.

61 The first published booklet contained only the Serbian and Montenegrin catalogue. The Bulgarian section was later published separately: *The Balkan States Exhibition*, Earl’s Court London, 1907. *Official Catalogue of the Bulgarian Section*, London 1907.

62 Cf. Johan Östling, Circulation, Arenas, and the Quest for Public Knowledge. Historiographical Currents and Analytical Frameworks, in: *History & Theory* 58 (2020), 111–126, 117.

the London exhibitors wanted to portray a rather illusionary and wishful picture of the Balkans, seeking the authenticity and incorruptibility of a pre-industrial village society in contrast to the perceived downsides of British industrial and modern society, they downplayed the modernisation efforts of the exhibiting countries.⁶³

Conclusion

All in all, the Balkan Committee can be regarded as an institutionalised curator that represented, processed, and played a decisive role in the circulation of knowledge about Southeast Europe in Great Britain. More generally, it seems interesting to explore the activities of similar groups to see how knowledge about an imperial buffer zone circulated between different but overlapping 'public arenas' in Britain. Jürgen Renn has theorised knowledge as encoded experience that enables individuals or social groups to solve problems or anticipate the most appropriate actions.⁶⁴ This was exactly what the Balkan Committee offered to the general public and political decision-makers: a solution to the Balkan question by experts. However, despite their supposedly honest efforts to understand the prevailing situation in the region, they employed a number of representational strategies that relegated the area and its inhabitants to the sphere of colonial imagination.

Although this knowledge was presented through the lens of a liberal political agenda, and was rather a medley of information, experiences, beliefs, and rumours, the Balkan Committee succeeded not only in familiarising a considerable part of British society with the current state of the Eastern Question but also in temporarily bringing the Balkans to the forefront of interest. The comparison of the Balkans with less explored or less known parts of the globe served as a claim to be recognised as experts on the region and therefore entitled to influence political decision-making. Above all, the Balkan Committee was the first platform that channelled almost all British individuals interested in exploring, studying, and presenting the peninsula and its inhabitants, and in agitating for their political emancipation. Knowledge of the Balkans seemed important to the Balkan Committee in at least two ways. On the one hand, its members believed that understanding and resolving the problems of the region could avoid a general European war; on the other hand, the Balkans seemed to be an inspiration for addressing questions such as urban poverty or home rule in the British Empire.

63 Perkins, *Peasants and Politics*, (2017), 60–64; Steward, *The Balkans in London*, (2008), 77–84.

64 Jürgen Renn, *From the History of Science to the History of Knowledge – and Back*, in: *Centaurus* 57/1 (2015), 37–53, 40.