



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

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Columnist

Shades of Sarajevo?

Monday's assassination of the Russian ambassador to Turkey, Andrei Karlov, by an off-duty Turkish police officer, raised the spectre of another assassination, in 1914, on Franz Josef Street in Sarajevo.

Gavrilo Princip's assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and his wife Sophie, in the cause of Serbian nationalism, unraveled the fragilities of an exceedingly complex political construct and resulted, ultimately, in World War I.

It's possible to look at the present state of relations between Russia and Turkey, Europe and Russia, the Arabs and the Turks, the Russians and Iran, Europe and the Arabs, the U.S. and everybody else, and begin to see many of the same actors groping around in a similarly complex — and one might think similarly fragile — maneuvering for power and influence.

What was dangerous in 1914 — and ultimately led to some 38 million casualties — is even more dangerous in 2016, given the unprecedented capacity for killing and destruction possessed by modern nation-states. To date, the death toll for the war in Syria is estimated at some 400,000 people, including the utter destruction of Aleppo, and according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 4.8 million people have fled to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq. An additional 6.6 million people are internally displaced within Syria, and some one million have requested asylum to Europe alone.

Given the sweeping historical and modern enmities between Turkey and Russia, one wonders what additional horrors could result from the assassination of a diplomat in an Ankara art gallery. Could it provoke open warfare? The 2015 downing of a Russian fighter jet by Turkey seemed to have been papered over, for the most part, but how will Putin and Co. respond to the assassination

of their ambassador by a Turkish cop?

And what are Russia's interests in Syria?

Whatever they really are — a warm water port in the Mediterranean perhaps, a proxy nation and expansion of influence — it seems probable they are driven by Eurasianism, which is an openly resurgent Russian philosophy that rejects the west — Europe and America — as antithetical to the "true" heritage of Russian culture and tradition, and seeks instead to exploit a natural center of Russian interests and influence in Asia.

Vladimir Putin is known to be coached by Eurasianist ideologists, and we can see much of that in practical operation today: Russian intervention in the Ukraine, in Georgia, in Chechnya, in Syria, and a collective political and military coziness with Iran, are all offered as evidence. (See related column, page 15.)

If Turkey and Russia do come to open blows, would Turkey invoke Article 5 of the NATO treaty, which

provides for collective defense when a member is attacked?

One wonders what our own strategic interests might be in getting involved, and whether we would allow ourselves to be drawn into a five-sided argument that has thus far evaded any historical solution and has every potential to devolve into another catastrophic world war.

It is interesting to note the statement of Archibald Wavell, an officer who served under British General Allenby in the Palestine campaign, at the conclusion of World War I. "After 'the war to end war' they seem to have been pretty successful in Paris at making a 'Peace to end Peace'." He foresaw, it seems, the dangerous and continuing complexity of arrangements whose fruits have been ripening for so long. The legacy of World War I in the Middle East has been one hundred years of continuing crisis.

As of this writing it appears that cooler heads are prevailing, at least as they are reported in the world

media. But one wonders how many other young Turks, to say nothing of anti-Assad Syrians, are harboring the same sentiments, and now emboldened, will attempt similar assassinations or even large-scale terror attacks on Russian personnel or entities.

And all of this without mentioning ISIS, who have demonstrated resilience by retaking Palmyra, or intractable Turkish-Kurdish enmities, or the on-going battle for Mosul in Iraq, or the lingering influence and capabilities of Iranian militias in a continuous arc from Lebanon to Baghdad.

What is our interest in all of this again?

So far, the President-elect has indicated an unwillingness to engage in the Syrian conflict, which seems a wise decision, and promises "we are going to destroy ISIS, believe me." I'm not sure what that means, maybe nobody knows what that means, and maybe it doesn't really mean anything, but

here's hoping cooler heads continue to prevail after this morning's horror show.

And here's hoping that somehow, in some way, we can find a way to responsibly develop our own considerable resources to achieve energy independence. It seems probable that were we able to do that, and to reacquire some pragmatism in our foreign policy, dumping this strange compunction to "intervene" in internecine conflicts, or to referee family fights, we might be able to avoid falling into the well ourselves.

In "Age of Assassins," a history of political assassinations, author Michael Newton writes of Princip's murder of the Archduke: "Out of the deed's meaningless impulse bursts a war of a horror that none could have predicted. Some schoolboys playing the role of doomed heroes helped topple a civilization."

Let's hope beyond hope that we can, for once, learn from history.

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