

Spring 2016

Disraeli and the Eastern Question: Defending British Interests

Caroline A. Reed
Harding University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/tenor>

 Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Reed, Caroline A. (Spring 2016) "Disraeli and the Eastern Question: Defending British Interests," *Tenor of Our Times*: Vol. 5, Article 4. Available at: <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/tenor/vol5/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Humanities at Scholar Works at Harding. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Tenor of Our Times* by an authorized editor of Scholar Works at Harding. For more information, please contact scholarworks@harding.edu.



DISRAELI AND THE EASTERN QUESTION: DEFENDING BRITISH INTERESTS

By Caroline A. Reed

The Eastern Question concerned Europe for the better part of 500 years, but it reached crisis points several times during the 19th century. The deterioration of Turkey, the creeping advance of Russia into the Balkans and Central Asia, and the creation of an alliance between Russia, Germany, and Austria-Hungary were all issues contained in the Eastern Question of the 1870s. All three of these issues threatened Britain's goals of securing India and maintaining a balance of power between the major powers on the European continent. Therefore, in dealing with the Eastern Question, Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli pursued a course that kept Russia out of India and reasserted British power relative to the rest of the European Continent.

An understanding of events in the 1870s requires knowledge of the Eastern Question. According to historian J. A. R. Marriott, there were six main underlying factors involved in the Eastern Question.¹ The principal issue was the effect of the Ottoman Empire's deterioration on the major European powers. The second major issue was the boundaries and ethnic makeup of the Balkan states like Serbia and Bulgaria located within the Ottoman Empire. A portion of the Ottoman Empire was located in Europe, which meant that many of the people in the Balkans were Christians and therefore persecuted by the Ottoman Muslims.² Third, control of the Black Sea, particularly the Dardanelles and Constantinople, often caused conflict between the Russians, Austro-Hungarians, and Ottomans. The Ottomans continued to control Constantinople, which benefitted Britain since the Ottoman territory provided a buffer between Russia and India. Russia and Austria-Hungary posed another problem for the powers, for both countries wanted access to the sea. Russians and Austro-Hungarians also had ties to different Balkan states that were both religious and ethnic in nature.³ The Russian government, in particular, had to consider its subjects' panslavism and sympathy for the Orthodox Christians.⁴ Marriott says that the sixth factor

¹ J. A. R. Marriott, *The Eastern Question: An Historical Study in European Diplomacy*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), 2-3.

² Robert Blake, *Disraeli* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1967), 576.

³ Marriott, 3.

⁴ Blake, 576.

is “the attitude of the European powers in general, and of England in particular, towards all or any of the questions enumerated above.”⁵

Towards the end of the 19th century, the makeup of the European continent began to change. The Franco-Prussian War left France weak while Germany experienced a surge in power after finally unifying in 1871. Beginning in 1870, the leaders of Russia, Germany, and Austria-Hungary made a series of state visits to each other’s countries to confirm their similar foreign policy positions and a collective need to follow the same policies. This unofficial alliance, called the *dreikaiserbund* (“three emperor bond”), represented a return to the alliance systems in Europe.⁶ The *dreikaiserbund* concentrated power on the continent in those three countries, leaving France, Italy, and Britain without allies to counter them. On the British side, Disraeli returned to the office of Prime Minister in 1874 intent on reasserting Britain’s dominance on the European stage. Disraeli accused William Gladstone and his Liberal government of being inactive and isolationist because of Gladstone’s “failure to mediate in the Franco-Prussian war, [or] to prevent the Russian denunciation of the Black Sea clauses.”⁷ One of Disraeli’s biographers, Georg Brandes, went so far as to say that these supposed blunders “made England an object of ridicule to every European state.”⁸ Disraeli considered foreign policy to be “the most important and fascinating task of the statesman,” so he resolved to pursue a more aggressive, pro-empire course.⁹ In Disraeli’s own words, “what our duty is at this critical moment is to maintain the Empire of England.”¹⁰

Britain also had to keep events in Central Asia in mind. Any threat to India could not be ignored because it was the centerpiece of the British Empire. While most countries were afraid of an invasion on home soil, Britain instead worried about an invasion in India.¹¹ To the British statesmen

⁵ Marriott, 3.

⁶ Barbara Jelavich, *A Century of Russian Foreign Policy 1814-1914* (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1964), 159.

⁷ Blake, 571.

⁸ Georg Brandes, *Lord Beaconsfield: A Study* (NY: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1966), 222.

⁹ Blake, 570.

¹⁰ Benjamin Disraeli, “The Maintenance of Empire, 1872,” <http://www.ccis.edu/faculty/dskarr/Discussions%20and%20Readings/primary%0sources/Disraeli,%20speech%201872.htm> (accessed November 23, 2015).

¹¹ Sneh Mahajan, *British Foreign Policy 1874-1914: The Role of India* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1-2.

Disraeli and the Eastern Question

of the 1870s, Russia was the biggest threat because of its expanding territory, economy, and population. Russia's expansion into Afghanistan threatened the northwest frontier of India.¹² During the 1800s, Russia had steadily advanced her territory in the Far East and Central Asia. China and "disunited, semi-barbarous states" in the Middle East did not put up much of a fight so it had been fairly easy for the Russians to expand as far south as Afghanistan.¹³ Neither Russia nor Britain controlled Afghanistan officially, but this mountainous region separated Russian forces from India. However, Britain was more afraid of Russian influence rather than an actual physical attack. The British feared that it would be very easy for Russia to incite an insurrection among the Indian troops.¹⁴ In fact, by 1870 the Russian generals located in Central Asia began ingratiating themselves with the Amir of Afghanistan. The British followed suit and so the Amir felt caught between the two countries. Gladstone's Liberal government, however, refused to promise military aid to the Amir in the case of a Russian attack and so by the time Disraeli came to power, the Amir was leaning more towards the Russians.¹⁵

¹² Bernard Porter, *The Lion's Share: A Short History of British Imperialism 1850-1995*, 3rd ed. (London: Pearson Education, 1996), 84-85.

¹³ Jelavich, 161.

¹⁴ Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia* (NY: Kodansha International, 1994), 359.

¹⁵ William Flavelle Monypenny and George Earle Buckle, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield*, vol. 2 (NY: The Macmillan Company, 1929), 748-749.



Selfstudyhistory, “Imperialism and Colonialism: The Great Game,” History and General Studies: A Complete Study of History for Civil Services and General Studies, <http://selfstudyhistory.com/2015/01/02/world-historyimperialism-and-colonialism-the-great-game/> (accessed December 14, 2015).

Disraeli and the Eastern Question

In reality, Russia did not have the ability to finance development in its outer fringes such as Afghanistan. Therefore, events in Afghanistan did not matter to Russia to the extent that they mattered to Britain.¹⁶ The Russian government made repeated promises not to advance farther or threaten India.¹⁷ However, Russian generals in Central Asia often made territorial advances that were not sanctioned by the government, which undermined their promises. St. Petersburg's lack of apparent control over their generals made Britain and Disraeli nervous.¹⁸ The Russian threat in Central Asia, combined with the age-old worry of Russia's quest for Constantinople, a worry made more tangible by the Balkan Crisis, affected the way Disraeli handled the coming crises of the Eastern Question.

Beginning in 1875, it became apparent that the Eastern Question was causing another crisis when several revolts broke out in Bosnia and spread quickly to Herzegovina and Serbia. The uprising broke out for several reasons, all of which pointed to weakness and gross mismanagement on the part of the Ottoman government. The Ottomans had an unsound economic structure that worsened by heavy borrowing and heavy spending. In addition, there was a drought and famine in Asia Minor from 1873-1874 and a financial panic in Constantinople in 1873.¹⁹ These events only made existing conditions worse for the Christian peasants in the European provinces of the Ottoman Empire. The Christians paid heavy taxes to both landowners and tax farmers and were often exploited for more money.²⁰ There was little opportunity for justice for these peasants, so they opted for rebellion.²¹ This uprising gave Disraeli his first opportunity to pursue the more active foreign policy he believed was necessary to maintain Britain's power and importance on the European Continent. Therefore, as the Balkan Crisis developed, Disraeli sought a response that was solely Britain's rather than one dependent on the major powers.²²

The first formal reaction by any of the major European powers to the Balkan Crisis was the Andrassy Note. Count Andrassy, the Foreign Minister

¹⁶ Jelavich, 171.

¹⁷ R. W. Seton-Watson, *Disraeli, Gladstone, and the Eastern Question: A Study in Diplomacy and Party Politics* (London: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd., 1962) 4-6.

¹⁸ Jelavich, 170-171.

¹⁹ Leften Stavros Stavrianos, *The Balkans Since 1453* (NY: Rinehart, 1958), 390.

²⁰ Stavrianos, 397.

²¹ Seton-Watson, 17.

²² Blake, 580.

for Austria-Hungary, Prince Gorchakov, the Chancellor of Russia, and Prince Bismarck of Germany formulated a reform program for the Ottomans in an effort to appease the rebelling Balkan states. This committee of foreign ministers sent out the so-called Andrassy Note on December 30, 1875 to the major European powers. The reforms called for the “abolition of tax farming, agrarian improvements, a guarantee that provincial revenues should be spent on provincial needs,” religious freedom for Christians in the Balkan states, and a joint Muslim and Christian commission to oversee enforcement of all the reforms.²³ The *dreikaiserbund* hoped that the Andrassy Note would produce true reforms in the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans usually did not implement the reforms that European powers imposed on them, but the method the Andrassy Note laid out had potential for true reform.²⁴ Russia, Germany, Italy, and France quickly accepted the Andrassy Note. Britain, or rather Disraeli, hesitated. He wanted Britain’s course to be set by the British and the British alone. Disraeli did not appreciate being left out of the discussion of terms for the Ottomans by the *dreikaiserbund*.²⁵ Now he either had to simply follow the other powers or do nothing. Disraeli reluctantly accepted the terms, but it did not matter anyway because the Andrassy Note failed. Though the European powers and the Turks accepted it, the rebels in the Balkan states did not, as they did not see the reforms actually being achieved unless the European powers put real force behind it.²⁶

Meanwhile, Disraeli made a couple of political moves that strengthened Britain’s hold over India and showed the rest of Europe that India was fully Britain’s territory. One of Disraeli’s biographers, Clive Bigham, calls both of these actions “personal strokes” for Disraeli.²⁷ These are two of the events he is most remembered for in his whole political career. The first of these moves was the purchase of shares in the Suez Canal. Although far from carrying the majority of Britain’s overall trade, the Suez Canal was extremely important commercially and strategically for Britain. 4/5 or 80 percent of the trade through the Canal itself was British. The Suez Canal cut the route from Britain to India down by several weeks and nearly

²³ Stavrianos, 400.

²⁴ “Count Andrassy’s Note,” *John Bull* 2,876 (January 22, 1876), 56.

²⁵ Marvin Swartz, *The Politics of British Foreign Policy in the Era of Disraeli and Gladstone* (NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 55.

²⁶ Stavrianos, 400.

²⁷ Hon. Clive Bigham, *The Prime Ministers of Britain 1721-1921* (London: John Murray, 1922), 294.

Disraeli and the Eastern Question

6,000 miles. For Britain, this was important should there be more Indian insurrections or Russia threatened their interests in India or the Far East. Because of this, Disraeli moved toward involvement in the Canal Company before he became Prime Minister. However, the Suez Canal Company was French owned.²⁸ He tried to buy out the owner, Ferdinand de Lesseps, soon into his term as Prime Minister in order to control the company but nothing came of it. De Lesseps was not willing to sell despite the fact that the company was running at a loss.²⁹ Disraeli continued to look for a way to involve Britain in the Canal. The Canal was too important for Britain's trade and defense of India to not have a solid and defendable financial interest in it.

In 1875, Egypt's precarious financial situation was pushing the government very close to bankruptcy.³⁰ The Khedive of Egypt, Isma'il Pasha, had been spending an increasing amount of money until he could not pay the debt of three to four million pounds that he owed in 1875. Virtually, the only option he had left to raise the money was to sell his 144,000 shares. The Khedive began secret negotiations with two different French companies in attempt to sell his shares. Henry Oppenheim, a financier who was greatly interested in Egypt, knew of the negotiations. He then told Frederick Greenwood, the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and Greenwood let the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Lord Derby, know of the development.³¹ Disraeli wanted to act quickly because of Egypt's precarious financial situation, as well as the interest show by French companies in buying the share. Both the Cabinet and the Khedive were reluctant.³² The French companies tried to raise the money in time but could not and the French government refused to intervene even after de Lesseps requested it.³³ The Khedive eventually decided that it did not make sense for him to sell to a French company because it was less profitable for him.³⁴ He informed the British government that he was ready to sell the shares. Disraeli felt he needed to act quickly so the Khedive did not change his mind. Parliament was not sitting at the time of the negotiations so Disraeli had to procure the money through a loan. Disraeli was a friend with the Rothschilds, a wealthy

²⁸ Blake, 581.

²⁹ Ibid., 582.

³⁰ Porter, 90-91.

³¹ Monypenny and Buckle, 779.

³² Seton-Watson, 26-27.

³³ Blake, 582.

³⁴ Seton-Watson, 26-27.

British family that was involved in banking, and so requested that their firm put up the four million pounds. They agreed immediately and the transaction was secured.³⁵

On November 24, 1875, the Queen wrote in her journal that the purchase gave Britain “complete security for India, and altogether places us in a very safe position.”³⁶ *The Times* claimed that now Britain finally had stock in Egypt. This was somewhat of an overstatement, but it highlighted the importance of the purchase because it gave Britain something tangible in Egypt.³⁷ Many European countries recognized the purchase as a masterful stroke for British foreign policy. In fact, nearly every European country aside from Russia congratulated the British government on the purchase.³⁸ In a debate over the shares purchase in Parliament, Lord George Hamilton said, “The purchase told the world that if in the past we had ignored the advantages of the Canal, we had amply condoned our error, and by this judicious investment... we had formed a happy combination which would do much towards securing a free and uninterrupted water way between this country and India.”³⁹ Though Disraeli did not know it at the time, the purchase he directed led Britain’s increasing influence in the Suez and in Egypt over the next decade.⁴⁰ For the time being, major powers recognized that the Suez was an extra layer of security for British interests in India, as well as the Suez Canal itself.

In 1876, Disraeli made the second political move that gave Britain a greater hold over India. Early in that year, Queen Victoria began pressuring Disraeli to introduce a bill to create the title, Empress of India, a phrase already used colloquially. The timing was inconvenient for Disraeli, but his Queen placed immense pressure on him.⁴¹ Though he was reluctant to use his political capital to pass the bill, the conferment of the title agreed with

³⁵ Blake, 583.

³⁶ “Queen Victoria to Mr. Theodoe Martin, Windsor Castle, Nov. 26, 1875,” *The Letters of Queen Victoria, Second Series: A Selection from Her Majesty’s Correspondence and Journal between the Years 1862 and 1878*, vol. 2, ed. George Earle Buckle (London: John Murray, 1926), 428.

³⁷ Porter, 90-91.

³⁸ Monypenny and Buckle, 791.

³⁹ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*. “Resolution. Adjourned Debate,” HC Debate, 21 February 1876, v. 227: col. 636. <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com>

⁴⁰ Byron Farwell, *Queen Victoria’s Little Wars* (NY: W. W. Norton and Company, 1972), 253.

⁴¹ E. J. Feuchtwanger, *Disraeli* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000), 177.

Disraeli and the Eastern Question

everything Disraeli believed and expressed about imperialism and the importance of capturing the imagination of India.⁴² The timing of it also lined up with the Prince of Wales' recent trip to India. Within the context of growing fears of Russian advance in Central Asia, Queen Victoria was more sensitive to the fact that Tsar Alexander II was an Emperor and she was not.⁴³ The leaders of Germany and Austria-Hungary also held Imperial titles. Furthermore, the Queen's daughter was soon to have an Imperial title and the Queen, understandably, would not have appreciated her daughter outranking her.⁴⁴ Therefore, creating the title of Empress for her was an attempt to reassert British power and authority.⁴⁵ The Queen recognized that the Empress title reflected the status she had over India since the Indian Mutiny, and sent a message to the world, namely Russia, that India was off limits.⁴⁶

There were several objections to the Bill in both Houses. One objection was that the title would only apply to India. The case was made for the title to encompass all of the colonies with the Princes becoming the Princes of Australia and Canada. However, this idea was quickly dropped because there was a greater difference in relationship between Great Britain and India than between her other colonies. The Empress title was incredibly helpful for Britain's presence in India.⁴⁷ Many British subjects also worried about forsaking the ancient royal title in favor of an imperial title. It seemed un-English in many ways.⁴⁸ Other monarchs had imperial titles, but English monarchs did not. The Queen dispelled all these fears in a letter to Disraeli on March 18 in which she said that she did not have the "*slightest intention* of giving the title of Imperial Highness to any of her children, or of making any change in the name of the Sovereign of Great Britain."⁴⁹ Disraeli explained these intentions repeatedly to Parliament. The Queen would remain Queen first and foremost and be Empress only in India.⁵⁰ The Royal Titles Act

⁴² Feuchtwanger, 177.

⁴³ Blake, 562.

⁴⁴ Feuchtwanger, 177.

⁴⁵ Blake, 562.

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Longford, *Queen Victoria: Born to Succeed* (NY: Harper & Row, 1965), 404.

⁴⁷ Monypenny and Buckle, 806.

⁴⁸ Feuchtwanger, 178.

⁴⁹ "From Queen Victoria, Windsor Castle, March 11, 1876," Monypenny and Buckle, 809.

⁵⁰ Monypenny and Buckle, 811.

finally passed at the end of year, giving the Queen the title of Empress of India on the end of her name. There were celebrations around India for a full two weeks leading up to the proclamation on the first of January, 1877. Before the actual proclamation, Lord Lytton, the Viceroy in India, decorated Indian chiefs with honors, increased the salaries of the chiefs and their army, distributed food and clothing to the poor, and granted amnesty to prisoners. Disraeli hoped that the Empress title would impress upon the Indian people the strength of the Queen and counteract rumors about Russia extending their authority.⁵¹ In a letter to Lady Bradford on December 28, 1876, Disraeli said of the celebrations of Empress, “it has no doubt consolidated our empire there.”⁵²

While Disraeli focused on the Royal Titles Bill at home, Serbia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina continued to rebel against the Ottoman government. At the end of May 1876, two events occurred at the same time. When the Balkan crisis worsened in May, the *dreikaiserbund* made an attempt at another reform program like the Andrassy Note. Prince Bismarck, Gorchakov, and Count Andrassy gathered once again to create terms for a two-month armistice between the different sides in the uprising.⁵³ The Berlin Memorandum, as it was called, basically extended the Andrassy Note. The Christians could keep their arms initially while the consuls from the various powers oversaw the settlement of refugees and the implementation of reforms for the Balkan states. They recognized that continued trouble in the Balkan states was an easy way to break up their alliance.⁵⁴ Though Bismarck, Andrassy, and Gorchakov drew up the actual document, they did consult the British, French, and Italian ambassadors to Germany before finalizing it. All of the ambassadors, including Britain’s Lord Odo Russell, agreed to the terms and expected their governments to react favorably to the memorandum.⁵⁵ However, Disraeli completely rejected the Memorandum. He did not like the reforms it proposed or the fact that it was created among the *dreikaiserbund* without British input.⁵⁶ At this point, Disraeli felt that Britain’s rejection of the Memorandum was the correct step in the imperial course he was taking.

⁵¹ Seton-Watson, 6-7.

⁵² “To Lady Bradford, Hughenden Manor, December 28,” Monypenny and Buckle, 826.

⁵³ Seton-Watson, 33.

⁵⁴ Stavrianos, 400.

⁵⁵ Seton-Watson, 34.

⁵⁶ Feuchtwanger, 182.

Disraeli and the Eastern Question

Britain no longer appeared to be isolationist because she was making her own decisions rather than accepting it like all of the other powers. Britain also did not have to intervene to be interventionist or commit to either Turkey or the Balkan states. Furthermore, in his calculations, pushback from Britain equaled uneasiness and weakness in the *dreikaiserbund* alliance.⁵⁷ He did not succeed in weakening the alliance at this point, but he certainly made an impression on the other powers. Disraeli's biographer, Edgar Feuchtwanger, called the rejection of the Memorandum Disraeli's "most high-profile initiative" of that year.⁵⁸

Immediate events justified Disraeli's rejection of the Berlin Memorandum. On May 30, 1876, the same day the *dreikaiserbund* issued a Memorandum, a palace coup took place in Constantinople. Murad V replaced Abdul Aziz as Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. Soon after, in June, both the Ottoman Foreign Affairs and War Ministers died at the hands of one of the council chamber guards.⁵⁹ All the powers realized they created the Berlin Memorandum in vain. They had to give the new Sultan time to set up his government before they could possibly impose any reforms.⁶⁰ The new Sultan promised reforms that would hopefully treat the Christians and Balkan peoples better. Instead, Britain's rejection of the Memorandum only emboldened the Ottomans against adhering to any reforms. The message the Turks received was that Britain's interest in preserving the Ottoman Empire came first before any genuine desire for the Turks to reform.⁶¹

Serbia declared war on the Ottomans in the early summer of 1876. At first the declaration of war did not produce much more debate among the powers. The declaration was essentially a formal statement of existing circumstances. However, later in the summer, reports began to surface that the Turks had committed atrocities against the Christians in Bulgaria, such as arson, sodomy, rape, and torture. Soon, Britain was in an uproar over the Bulgarian atrocities. Disraeli did not fully trust the horror stories, particularly, the initial reports.⁶² In fact, it was difficult to tell what was actually happening with the Turkish Christians. On the one hand, William Richard Holmes, the British consul at Sarajevo, kept insisting that it really

⁵⁷ Seton-Watson, 38-39.

⁵⁸ Feuchtwanger, 182.

⁵⁹ Seton-Watson, 35-37.

⁶⁰ Blake, 588-589.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Blake, 592.

was not as terrible as it seemed. He also insisted that the Christians were not vying for autonomy, but rather that they be treated justly under Turkish rule. However, many news correspondents, travel journal authors, and relief workers located in Bulgaria claimed otherwise and corroborated the story that the Christians were being persecuted and wanted autonomy.⁶³ Unfortunately, Disraeli made some distasteful comments, dismissing the atrocities as nothing more than “coffee-house babble.”⁶⁴ Gladstone even came out of retirement to speak against Disraeli on this issue and to champion the Bulgarian Christians’ cause.⁶⁵ Disraeli obstinately refused to “respond to the scare-mongering” of the Liberals.⁶⁶ He was not pro-Turk or opposed to autonomy, but he did not see the benefit of an “emotional hostility to the Turks.”⁶⁷ He cared more about the fate of the Balkans, the impact on Turkey, and the relationship between Russia and Britain rather than what it meant for the Christians.⁶⁸

By the fall of 1876, the Ottomans routed the Serbian army and only fought a few skirmishes. The real battle was about to begin, because the conflict did not affect only Serbia and the Ottoman Empire, it affected nearly all of the major European powers. Therefore, they all had opinions about the armistice. On the Russian side, the war between the Serbs and the Ottomans inspired a resurgence of Russian Pan Slavism and sympathy for Orthodox Christians in the Balkans.⁶⁹ Pan Slavism was a broad term that encompassed people with many different types of programs, from the Moscow Slavic Benevolent Society to the Slavic Ethnographical Exhibition. However, all Pan Slavs sought Russian leadership of their Slavic brothers and sisters in the Balkans. They wanted the Balkan provinces to be liberated from the Ottomans and claimed by Russia instead.⁷⁰ Tsar Alexander II did not condone the uprising or Pan Slavism, but enough of the Russian consuls located in the Balkan provinces were actually Pan Slavic that they misrepresented Russia’s goals.⁷¹ Disraeli’s biographer, Robert Blake, wrote that General Ignatyev, the Russian ambassador at Constantinople, “frankly aimed at the overthrow of Turkish power in the Balkans and at Russian

⁶³ Seton-Watson, 29-31.

⁶⁴ Blake, 593.

⁶⁵ Feuchtwanger, 183.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁶⁸ Blake, 580.

⁶⁹ Seton-Watson, 19.

⁷⁰ Jelavich, 174.

⁷¹ Seton-Watson, 19-20.

Disraeli and the Eastern Question

seizure of the Straits.”⁷² Pan Slavism threatened other European powers like Austria-Hungary and Britain. Disraeli tended to only see the radical Pan Slav side, which clouded his view of Russian designs.⁷³ However, it was not Disraeli’s fault that he felt threatened by the Russian government’s perceived Pan Slavism. From the outside, it was reasonable to assume that Russia would be sympathetic to the Serbian cause. The Pan Slav influence seemed overwhelming, and in many ways it was. Pan Slavism often influenced the Tsar when he was surrounded by it, like at Livadia. When more clear-headed ministers surrounded him in St. Petersburg, he was pacifist.⁷⁴

On the British side, Disraeli continued the traditional policy of maintaining the Ottoman Empire. Russia’s advances on the Ottoman Empire threatened Britain’s interests in India in a roundabout way. Britain needed to be able to communicate with and travel to India. Their best options were to go overland through the Mediterranean or through the new Suez Canal. Russian movement into Ottoman territory threatened British access to both of those routes.⁷⁵ The Bulgarian atrocities and the resurgence of Pan Slavism heightened the tension between Russia and the Ottomans. This made Disraeli nervous because a war between the two countries seemed imminent. He needed to make sure Russia knew Britain would intervene if their interests were threatened.⁷⁶ Disraeli still considered the protection of the Ottoman Empire against Russia to be the most important way to protect India.⁷⁷

Between the fall of 1876 and the spring of 1877, a myriad of armistice options, negotiations, and ultimatums passed between the Ottomans and the major European powers. Overarching all the negotiations were the opposing forces of pan Slavism in Russia and the need to protect Turkey on the British side. Essentially the Turks refused everything either power suggested. Russia and Britain continually made proposals, however, because the Ottomans’ own terms were completely unacceptable. They wanted the Serbian prince to pay homage to the Sultan and increase taxes on the Serbians.⁷⁸ Russia could not agree to such terms because of the consequences

⁷² Blake, 610.

⁷³ Seton-Watson, 20.

⁷⁴ Blake, 609.

⁷⁵ Porter, 85-86.

⁷⁶ Blake, 608.

⁷⁷ Lord Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries: The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Empire* (NY: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1977), 519.

⁷⁸ Seton-Watson, 95-96.

for the Serbian Christians. Britain could not agree to the terms because Russia would not agree to them, and, if Russia was unsatisfied with the settlement of the war, they would declare war on the Ottomans. Of course, the Serbians would never accept the Ottomans' terms either. In September of 1876, Britain's Lord Derby proposed maintaining the status quo of Bosnian and Montenegrin territories and called for the autonomy of Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Bulgaria with the transition to be overseen by the powers.⁷⁹ All of the powers agreed to Lord Derby's suggestions, except the Ottomans. They countered the proposal by suggesting a long armistice with a general reform program for the Balkans that none of the other powers believed would occur. Most of the powers, including Britain, agreed but both Russia and Germany hesitated.⁸⁰ Britain might be able to pretend that the Ottomans would carry out the reforms, but the Russian government could not ignore the outcry from the Russian public to defend the Christians.

Lord Derby then proposed that the powers meet for a conference in Constantinople. Everyone agreed, and the Constantinople Conference began on December 12, 1876. Lord Salisbury went as Britain's representative, which pleased Disraeli because the two men had similar, if not identical, ideas about the whole situation. Unlike Lord Derby, Lord Salisbury had a healthy suspicion of the Russians, and he never let an olive branch from them go to waste. However, he was unlike Disraeli in that he was determined to get the Balkan Christians out from under the Ottomans as soon as possible.⁸¹ Lord Salisbury was a perfect mix between the opposing sides of Lord Derby and Disraeli.

The Conference was to settle three main things: peace terms between the Ottomans and Serbs, autonomy of Bosnia and Bulgaria, and the logistics of international oversight of the terms.⁸² The objective was to settle the Balkan territorial issues and Ottomans' reform issues rather than make sure that any of the powers got anything tangible out of the terms.⁸³ However, the Conference was doomed to fail from the beginning. As soon as it started, the Ottomans announced a new Grand Vizier and a new constitution that promised new reforms and a better system. In reality, they

⁷⁹ George Carlslake Thompson, *Public Opinion and Lord Beaconsfield, 1875-1880* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1886), 60-61.

⁸⁰ Thompson, 70.

⁸¹ Feuchtwanger, 186-187.

⁸² Seton-Watson, 122.

⁸³ Blake, 611.

Disraeli and the Eastern Question

were simply stalling and trying to disrupt the Conference, because they did not want it to take place.⁸⁴ As usual, the Ottomans fooled none of the powers into thinking that they were sincere. However, there was not much the delegates could do if the Ottoman's Constitution was promising all of the reforms that the Conference proposed. So the Conference ended in January of 1877, almost as soon as it started. The Ottomans and Serbs finally made peace but only based on the status quo rather than any territorial changes or promised reforms.⁸⁵

Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire in April 1877. All of the major European powers expected Russia to win and to eventually occupy Constantinople. Apparently, the tension and worry led Disraeli to threaten resignation and the Queen to threaten abdication.⁸⁶ The closer Russia got to Constantinople, the more nervous the British became. Disraeli was afraid that the Russians would reach Constantinople faster than the British fleet could be sent through the Dardanelles, so he suggested occupying Gallipoli. The Cabinet rejected his suggestion and instead settled on sending a note to Russia warning them not to go near Constantinople, the Straits, the Suez Canal, or Egypt.⁸⁷

The Ottomans effectively halted the Russians at a Bulgarian town called Plevna in July 1877 and held them back longer than anyone expected. This delay for the Russians gave Disraeli and his cabinet more time to formulate a response and contingency plan in case Russia did occupy Constantinople. Though the British threatened Russia numerous times with intervention if the Russians advanced further, Disraeli was not confident that they would not touch Constantinople. In October 1877, Disraeli's cabinet met to come up with plans in case Russia did advance towards the Bosphorus.⁸⁸ Disraeli had military plans ready for a long time before anything between Russia and the Ottomans broke out. Most of his plans were extravagant and unfeasible, like the occupation of Gallipoli, but the fact that he had possibilities planned, showed how much he distrusted Russia.⁸⁹ At this point in the war, Disraeli was able to convince the Cabinet to agree to war with Russia if the Russians actually occupied Constantinople and the

⁸⁴ Seton-Watson, 122.

⁸⁵ Thompson, 517-518.

⁸⁶ Feuchtwanger, 188.

⁸⁷ Stavrianos, 406-407.

⁸⁸ Feuchtwanger, 187-188.

⁸⁹ Blake, 612-613.

Straits.⁹⁰ The Russians finally took Plevna in December 1877 and continued their advance.

In January of 1878, the British Cabinet voted to send the British fleet through the Dardanelles and asked Parliament for six million pounds to spend on a potential war.⁹¹ On January 23, the British fleet sailed to Constantinople.⁹² *The Great Game* author Peter Hopkirk summed it up eloquently when he wrote, "...in February 1878, the Russian armies stood at the gates of Constantinople, their age-old dream seemingly about to be realized, only to find the British Mediterranean fleet anchored in the Dardanelles. It was a blunt warning to the Russians to proceed no further. War now seemed certain."⁹³ As an additional warning, Disraeli ordered that British Indian troops be moved towards the Mediterranean area, specifically Malta. Britain was trying to make it clear to the Russians that they would defend their interests in the Mediterranean with force.⁹⁴ Thankfully it did not come to that. In fact, there were no hostile encounters between Russia and Britain because the Russians stopped their advance just outside Constantinople.

Tsar Alexander backed down with his army two days away from Constantinople. The threat of war with Britain was reason enough for Tsar Alexander to stop his advance. Instead of continuing on to Constantinople, he made a truce with Turkey called the Treaty of San Stefano.⁹⁵ The Treaty called for the independence of Montenegro, Serbia, and Romania, and established Bulgaria as an autonomous principality. In addition, the Russians required a re-working of many of the borders of the Balkan states in order to get huge pieces of land in Anatolia.⁹⁶ Everything about the new Bulgaria was to be Russianized even though the Ottomans still nominally controlled it. The Treaty called for Russian oversight of every aspect of the government.⁹⁷ It was wholly unacceptable to every power, particularly to Britain and the Ottomans. Britain was afraid that Russian control of the Anatolian territory

⁹⁰ Stavrianos, 407.

⁹¹ Feuchtwanger, 189.

⁹² Stavrianos, 408.

⁹³ Hopkirk, 380.

⁹⁴ Feuchtwanger, 190.

⁹⁵ Hopkirk, 380.

⁹⁶ "Preliminary Treaty of Peace Between Russia and Turkey: Signed at San Stefano," February 9/March 3, 1878 <https://archive.org/details/jstor-2212669> (accessed November 23, 2015).

⁹⁷ Kinross, 524.

Disraeli and the Eastern Question

gained from the Treaty would allow them easy access to the Mediterranean, which in turn would allow easy access to India.⁹⁸ Even more than that, the treaty gave Russia considerable power over the Ottomans with the potential for increase over time. Disraeli made his opinion on the Treaty clear in a speech to the House of Lords:

It is to the subjugation of Turkey, it is against an arrangement, which practically would place at the command of Russia, and Russia alone, that unrivalled situation and its resources, which the European Powers places under the government of the Porte, that we protest.⁹⁹

Diplomats on every side suggested a congress in order to revise the Treaty of San Stefano more favorably. The hope was that a congress could fix the problems and tension without Russia and Britain going to war. Russia was reluctant to agree to a congress but eventually relented.

Before the Congress met, Britain made two secret agreements. Russia and Britain forged the first agreement. Lord Salisbury, who was now the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, and Count Shuvalov, an influential Russian statesman, negotiated the agreement.¹⁰⁰ It outlined the concessions and reservations that the two countries would voice at the main Congress and gave a solution to most of them. The main points included a division of Bulgaria into two different sections with two different governments. Britain also insisted on dramatically changing the borders laid out in the San Stefano Treaty with the specific purpose of keeping Russia from having access to the Aegean Sea.¹⁰¹ Unfortunately for Britain, they had to allow the Russians to keep some territory gained in the Asian part of the Ottoman Empire, namely Kars and Batoum.¹⁰² Tsar Alexander assured the British that they would not extend their territory any farther. No one in Britain put much stock in such a promise, but there was not much more that could be done. The agreement was signed on May 30, 1878.

The second agreement Britain conducted prior to the Congress was

⁹⁸ Hopkirk, 381.

⁹⁹ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*. "Message from the Queen-Army Reserve Forces," HL Debate, 08 April 1878, v. 239: col. 771.
<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com>.

¹⁰⁰ Blake, 644.

¹⁰¹ Seton-Watson, 418-419.

¹⁰² Feuchtwanger, 192.

the Cyprus Convention with the Ottomans. The document was very short. It addressed the threat posed by Russia if she gained Batoum, Ardahan, or Kars in the Asian part of the Ottoman Empire and promised Britain to defend against any Russian advance past those territories. “In order to enable England to make necessary provision for executing her engagement,” the Sultan agreed to give the island of Cyprus to Britain.¹⁰³ Biographer George Buckle believed that Disraeli himself chose Cyprus as the location but not without good reason. The island was perfectly situated in the Mediterranean to defend both the Persian Gulf and the Suez.¹⁰⁴ Commitment to stopping Russian aggression in the Asian part of the Ottoman Empire was a step for Britain, but it was also completely consistent with the direction of Disraeli’s policy since he became Prime Minister. The promise of British intervention contained Russia and minimized the threat to India from yet another direction. Almost as a side note, British control of Cyprus meant freedom for the Christians there, as well as a better position to enforce reforms for Christians all over the Ottoman Empire.¹⁰⁵

Scholars disagree over the effect that the secret preliminary agreements had on the effectiveness of the Congress. According to one source, the agreements locked Britain into certain concessions that hindered Disraeli and Lord Salisbury at the Congress.¹⁰⁶ Authors Monypenny and Buckle asserted that it was necessary to reach an agreement beforehand so that there was not an intractable conflict at the Congress with potentially disastrous results.¹⁰⁷ In the moment, meeting with Russia beforehand was the correct move to make. Armed with promises of concessions, both sides met, along with all the other major European powers, at the Congress of Berlin.

The Congress of Berlin opened on June 13, 1878 and lasted for exactly one month to “decide the fate and future of Eastern Europe.”¹⁰⁸ Attending the Berlin Congress were three diplomats each from Germany, Austria-Hungary, France, Great Britain, Italy, Russia, as well as a few

¹⁰³ “The Cyprus Convention,” BYU Harold Lee Library – History of Cyprus: Primary Documents, http://eudocs.lib.byu.edu/index.php/History_of_Cyprus:_Primary_Documents (accessed November 23, 2015).

¹⁰⁴ Monypenny and Buckle, 1171.

¹⁰⁵ Monypenny and Buckle, 1172.

¹⁰⁶ “Congress of Berlin and Its Consequences,” *North American Review* 127, no. 265 (Nov. – Dec., 1878), 393.

¹⁰⁷ Monypenny and Buckle, 1174.

¹⁰⁸ “The Congress,” *John Bull* 3,001 (June 15, 1878), 381.

Disraeli and the Eastern Question

representatives from Turkey.¹⁰⁹ Out of all the delegates at the Berlin Congress, Disraeli caused the greatest stir and excitement among Berliners and the press. He interested Berliners, particularly, because he actually traveled to Berlin himself as Prime Minister to be a part of the deliberations. *The Times* reported on June 13, “Lord Beaconsfield is the centre of attraction. His personal qualities, his past career, and his personal successes equally commanded the interest of the public.”¹¹⁰ The official object of the Congress was “to submit the work of San Stefano to the free discussion of the signatories of the Treaties of 1865 and 1871.”¹¹¹ As President of the Congress, Bismarck had the authority to decide the order of deliberation. He recognized that the sharpest point of contention and the one that involved the majority of the powers was the division of Bulgaria.¹¹² In fact, the primary difference between the Treaty of San Stefano and the Treaty of Berlin was the makeup of Bulgaria.¹¹³

The preliminary agreement between Russia and Britain addressed Bulgaria and called for the division of Bulgaria into two parts, but the two countries still disagreed over Britain’s desire for the Ottomans to have military control of the southern half.¹¹⁴ The Berlin Congress deliberated heavily over this specific issue because the Russians were unwilling to give in. Finally, Disraeli declared Britain’s proposal for the status of the southern province to be an ultimatum. He threatened to break up the Congress and even had his secretary, Montagu Corry, look into getting train tickets back to London for the very next day. Thankfully, Bismarck caught wind of Disraeli’s plans to leave and convinced him to stay. Behind the scenes,

¹⁰⁹ Henry F. Munro, *Berlin Congress Proceedings* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1918), 7-8.

Representing Germany was Prince Bismarck, Chancellor Herr von Bulow and Secretary of State Prince Hohenlohe-Schillingsfuerst; representing Austria-Hungary was Count Andrassy, Count Karolyi, and Baron Haymerle; representing France was Secretary of State M. Waddington, Count de Saint-Vallier, and Mons. Desprez; representing Great Britain was Prime Minister Lord Beaconsfield [Benjamin Disraeli], Secretary of State Lord Salisbury, and Lord Odo Russell; representing Italy was Count Corti and Count de Launay; representing Russia was Chancellor Prince Gorchakov, Count Shuvalov, and Mons. d’Oubril; representing Turkey was Caratheodory Pasha and General Mehmed Ali.

¹¹⁰ *The Times*, June 13, 1878.

¹¹¹ Seton-Watson, 446.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 446.

¹¹³ Stavrianos, 411.

¹¹⁴ Monypenny and Buckle, 1193.

Bismarck convinced the Russians of the British sincerity and intractability on this point. The next day Disraeli was pleasantly surprised to learn Russia's acquiescence.¹¹⁵ There were a few minor details of the Bulgarian question left, but they were settled fairly quickly.

Bulgaria was ultimately divided into three parts. The first was Bulgaria proper, which would be an autonomous principality. All the powers, including Britain, accepted that this part would be heavily influenced by Russia. The second portion became Eastern Roumelia, which was to be governed by a Christian governor and was semi-autonomous. The third and final portion included the Macedonian lands retained by Turkey.¹¹⁶ Disraeli told Lady Chesterfield of the Bulgarian question that Britain "gained a great victory here, the extent of which is hardly yet understood in England..."¹¹⁷ Disraeli won the major battle of the Congress of Berlin.

Treaty of San Stefano



Treaty of Berlin



"The Eastern Crisis,"

http://www.amitm.com/thecon/lesson8.html#The_Eastern_Crisis
(accessed December 14, 2015).

¹¹⁵ Seton-Watson, 448-449.

¹¹⁶ Jelavich, 184.

¹¹⁷ "To Lady Chesterfield, Berlin, June 28, 1878," Benjamin Disraeli, *The Letters of Disraeli to Lady Chesterfield and Lady Bradford 1876-1881*, vol. 2, ed. Marquis of Zetland (NY: D. Appleton and Company, 1929), 229.

Disraeli and the Eastern Question

The next major issue involved Austria-Hungary. The Austro-Hungarians wanted to claim Bosnia-Herzegovina as part of their territory. The British backed Count Andrassy's proposal because he had been on Britain's side during the Bulgarian incident.¹¹⁸ In fact, no one particularly opposed this point, though Russia agreed only reluctantly.¹¹⁹ Other major issues included disagreements over the borderline of Russia's Asiatic frontier. The main problem was a misunderstanding between Disraeli and the Russian Count Gorchakov over what border line they were trying to move. Once the other diplomats with them discovered the misunderstanding, they were quickly able to come to a compromise over where the line should be.¹²⁰ The final issue was that of Batum. Disraeli planned to argue strongly against Russian claims to it at the Congress. However, the details of the Cyprus Convention leaked right at the moment that Batum was being discussed. It was embarrassing for the British and made it hard for Disraeli or Lord Salisbury to ask for any concessions regarding Batum. They were only able to secure Batum as a free port rather than completely block the Russians from taking that area. Disraeli was right to worry about Russia in Batum because eight years later, Batum became a fortified Russian base as Russians claimed that the wording was vague.¹²¹ Even so, Britain made the correct move for the security of their colonies in obtaining Cyprus. Once the Congress knew all of the details, most of the diplomats praised Disraeli and Lord Salisbury for such a "daring stroke."¹²²

The Treaty of Berlin was signed on July 13, 1878. At the time, most people deemed it a major success, particularly for Disraeli and Britain. The German Crown Princess, Victoria, wrote to her mother Queen Victoria on the day it was signed to share that she thought that Britain's prestige on the continent was finally restored. The Russians had been checked and put in their place.¹²³ Disraeli and Lord Salisbury returned home to London to an enthusiastic public.¹²⁴ Disraeli had conquered the Eastern Question. If nothing else, he accomplished his own goals for Britain. Disraeli's own

¹¹⁸ Seton-Watson, 451.

¹¹⁹ Monypenny and Buckle, 1205.

¹²⁰ Seton-Watson, 454-455.

¹²¹ Blake, 649.

¹²² Monypenny and Buckle, 1215.

¹²³ "The German Crown Princess to Queen Victoria, July 13, 1878," ed. George Earle Buckle, 629.

¹²⁴ "Lord Beaconsfield's Speech," *John Bull* 3,006 (July 20, 1878), 461.

popularity and participation in the Congress turned all eyes towards Britain. Though Bismarck presided over the Berlin Congress and directed the general discussion, the entire Congress had been dominated by British goals and fears. In that regard, Disraeli reminded the other powers that Britain still had a strong, if not the strongest, say in continental and world affairs. Russian threats and advances towards India were sufficiently checked for the time being. Issues in Afghanistan continued to flare up, but Disraeli stopped the Russian advance he had feared from their conflict with Turkey and the San Stefano Treaty. While Russia gained some territory, the Treaty of Berlin made certain that there was not enough for her to threaten the Ottomans or Britain. Finally, the Congress of Berlin succeeded in breaking up the *dreikaiserbund*. Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Germany did not agree with each other enough by the end of the Congress and Eastern crisis as a whole to justify a continued joint policy.¹²⁵ They based their alliance largely on the problem in the Balkans, and now that the problem was “fixed” there was no longer a need for an alliance.

For more than 500 years, Europe dealt with the problem of the Eastern Question. The Question became especially troublesome in the 19th century, causing several crises. As Prime Minister in the 1870s, Benjamin Disraeli dealt with a great crisis that was exacerbated by the deterioration of the Ottoman Empire, Russia’s territorial advances in the Balkans and Central Asia, as well as an alliance between Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Germany. Disraeli successfully pursued a policy that contained the Russian threat to India and restored Britain’s power and prestige on the European Continent.

¹²⁵ W. A. Gauld, “‘The Dreikaiserbundnis’ and the Eastern Question, 1877-8, *The English Historical Review* 42, no. 168 (Oct., 1972), 568.