



The Eastern Question

1774-1923

A.L. Macfie



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A.L. MACFIE

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EDITORIAL FOREWORD

Such is the pace of historical enquiry in the modern world that there is an ever-widening gap between the specialist article or monograph, incorporating the results of current research, and general surveys, which inevitably become out of date. *Seminar Studies in History* are designed to bridge this gap. The books are written by experts in their field who are not only familiar with the latest research but have often contributed to it. They are frequently revised, in order to take account of new information and interpretations. They provide a selection of documents to illustrate major themes and provoke discussion, and also a guide to further reading. Their aim is to clarify complex issues without over-simplifying them, and to stimulate readers into deepening their knowledge and understanding of major themes and topics.

NOTE ON REFERENCING SYSTEM

Readers should note that numbers in square brackets [5] refer them to the corresponding entry in the Bibliography at the end of the book (specific page numbers are given in italics). A number in square brackets preceded by *Doc.* [*Doc.5*] refers readers to the corresponding item in the Documents section which follows the main text.

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PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

1 THE EASTERN QUESTION

For more than a century and a half, from the Russo-Turkish War of 1768–74 to the Treaty of Lausanne of 24 July 1923, the Eastern Question, the question of what should become of the Ottoman Empire, then in decline, played a significant, and even at times a dominant, part in shaping the relations of the Great Powers. In the eighteenth century it concerned mainly the conflicts generated by the expansion of Russia into the territories bordering the northern shores of the Black Sea. In the nineteenth century, following the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815), in the course of which a French expeditionary force occupied Egypt, it concerned the attempts of the subject peoples and their rulers to secure some degree of autonomy or independence, and the efforts of the Great Powers either to contain the tensions thereby generated or to exploit them to their own advantage. Thus in the 1820s the Greeks rose in revolt, and succeeded in securing their independence, despite the initial opposition of the powers; and in the 1830s Mehmet Ali, the ruler of Egypt, endeavoured to secure not only greater autonomy for Egypt but also the possession of Syria and a part of Anatolia, an enterprise eventually frustrated by the powers, who intervened to secure the preservation of the *status quo*. In the 1850s a Franco-Russian dispute concerning the administration of the Holy Places led to the outbreak of the Crimean War (1853–56), in which Turkey and a coalition of western European powers opposed what they saw as a further extension of Russian power in the area; and in the 1870s peasant rebellions in Bosnia and Herzegovina led once again to war between Russia and Turkey, and to the threat of war between Russia and a coalition of western powers. Not that the western powers were themselves averse to taking advantage of Ottoman weakness: on the contrary, in 1830 France occupied Algeria, and in 1881 Tunisia; while in 1878 Britain acquired Cyprus, and in 1882 Egypt. Only in the present century was the issue finally resolved. In 1908 Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 1911 Italy occupied Tripolitania; and in the Balkan

Wars (1912–13) Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece drove the Ottomans from the greater part of their remaining territories in Europe. Finally, in 1918–23, following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War (1914–18), the victorious Entente powers, in particular Britain and France, established a series of successor states and governments in the Arab provinces, while in Anatolia a resurgent Turkish National Movement succeeded in expelling the powers and setting up a Turkish national state, with its capital in Ankara.

Even the briefest of surveys would suggest that historians of the Eastern Question have not always agreed on its precise character and chronology. An anonymous English author, writing in the *Edinburgh Review* 1850, who believed that the question had become ‘fully constituted’ only at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, concluded that it concerned merely the question of what should become of the Ottoman Empire, then ‘ruinous and unwieldy’. M. A. Ubicini, who edited a collection of documents, entitled *La Question d’Orient devant l’Europe*, in 1854, evidently believed that it concerned only the dispute regarding the administration of the Holy Places, then becoming critical. Max Choublier, a French historian, who published *La Question d’Orient avant le Traité de Berlin* in 1899, and who believed that the question originated in the eighteenth century with the decline of the Ottoman Empire in the area of the Black Sea, pointed out that it involved many questions, including the possession of the remaining Ottoman territories in Europe, Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt, and a possible resurgence of ‘Muslim fanaticism’ in Asia and North Africa. Edouard Driault, who published *La Question d’Orient* in 1909, and who believed that the question arose as a result of the retreat of Islam in Europe and Asia, concluded that it was primarily concerned with the resurrection of the Christian Balkan states and the advance of Turkey’s Christian neighbours: ‘Gigantesque croisade, auprès de laquelle celles du moyen âge furent des jeux d’enfants’. J. A. Marriott, who published *The Eastern Question* in 1918, believed that it involved six specific factors: the part played by the Ottoman Turks in the history of Europe since their first crossing of the Hellespont in the fourteenth century; the position of the Balkan states, following the subsidence of the ‘waters of the Ottoman flood’; the question of access to the Black Sea, and the related questions of Constantinople and the Straits; the position of Russia in Europe; the position of the Habsburg Empire; and the attitude of the European powers in general.

A British Foreign Office handbook, entitled *History of the Eastern*

Question, published in 1918, took a similar view, arguing that the question was concerned merely with events in the Balkans, in particular with the problems created by the rise of Balkan nationalism and the encroachment of Austria and Russia. Three possible origins of the question were suggested: at the moment of the first appearance of the Slav peoples in the Balkans in the sixth century AD; at the moment of the first appearance of the Turks in Macedonia in the fourteenth century; and at the moment when Ottoman decline was first made evident in the eighteenth century. With regard to the advance of Russia, the handbook remarks, the Treaty of Kutchuk-Kainardji of 1774 appeared to mark the opening of the new epoch. Jacques Ancel, in *Manuel Historique de la Question d'Orient*, published in Paris in 1923, concluded that the question was born out of the dislocation of the Ottoman Empire and the rivalry among the European powers which this entailed. The question first became clearly formulated, he suggested, towards the end of the eighteenth century when, following the French Revolution of 1789, ideas of liberty and equality spread rapidly throughout the Balkans, and when, following the Treaty of Jassy of 1782, Russia acquired possession of substantial territories on the northern shores of the Black Sea. P. E. Mosely, who believed that the question originated, or at least became critical, in the 1830s (as the title of his work, *Russian Diplomacy and the Opening of the Eastern Question in 1838 and 1839*, indicates) concluded that it was concerned mainly with two questions – the future of Egypt and the future of the Straits.

Among more recent historians, Matthew Anderson, who published *The Eastern Question* in 1960, concluded that the question was concerned primarily with the efforts of the Great Powers to come to grips with the consequences of Ottoman decline, first made evident in the Russo-Turkish War of 1768–74. D. G. Clayton, who published *Britain and the Eastern Question* in 1970, concluded that there were in fact many eastern questions, including the struggle between Austria and Russia for the control of the lower Danube and the Aegean coastline, a struggle which started in the eighteenth century; the struggle for the control of Constantinople and the straits; Britain's conflict with France in north Africa, in particular with regard to the control of the Nile valley and the Suez isthmus; the control of the Mediterranean sea routes to India, particularly in the period following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869; racial and religious issues, of baffling complexity; and economic questions concerning trade and markets. Finally, Malcolm Yapp, whose book,

The Making of the Modern Near East, was published in 1987, in what must be seen as a radical departure from the traditional view, argues that the eastern question, in the nineteenth century at least, was concerned not with the decline of the Ottoman Empire but with its recovery. This recovery, he argues, which began in the reign of Selim III (1789–1807), played a significant part in stimulating ‘national opposition’. This opposition in turn provoked the intervention of the Great Powers, who sought to persuade the Ottomans to provide, not better or more efficient government, but less. The problem of the eastern question, he concludes, should be seen not in terms of ‘determination’ and the ‘impersonal forces of economics and nationalism’, but in terms of ‘accidental elements’, in the ‘choices of men, made in the turmoil of events with imperfect information and with all the weight of prejudice to which men are subject.’ There was ‘nothing inevitable about the way the Eastern Question developed and no historical ordinance which decreed that the Ottoman Empire should disappear’. As for the part played by the Great Powers in the affair, they were motivated primarily by the need to preserve prestige:

Neither the protection of the routes of empire nor economic interest nor even the balance of power in Europe weighed, in the end, against prestige. In order that they might remain great, Great Powers demanded to be treated as great. Important developments should not take place without their consent even if that consent was given only as the result of military defeat. The integrity of the Ottoman empire was like a bank on which the Great Powers could draw to make up the balance of their prestige. When the bank was exhausted there was no longer an easy line of credit in the Near East; such was the fate of Austria and Russia in 1914. [122, p. 92]

Such a ‘new view of the Eastern question’ is not adopted in this study, which follows a more traditional approach, emphasising the long term interests of the Great Powers in the question, which appear to have remained remarkably stable throughout. Nevertheless, Yapp’s approach is to be welcomed, for it is certain to promote renewed interest in the subject.

2 THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE AND THE GREAT POWERS IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Following the foundation of an Ottoman State in north-western Anatolia in the first half of the fourteenth century, the Ottomans concentrated on acquiring possession of the remaining Byzantine territories in Anatolia and the Balkans. Only when Sultan Mehmet II, the conqueror of Constantinople, had completed these conquests in the second half of the fifteenth century did the Ottomans turn their attention eastwards to conquer the Arab lands, acquiring in the process the titles of Caliph (Protector of Islam) and Servitor of the Two Holy Sanctuaries (Mecca and Medina). At the height of their power, in the second quarter of the sixteenth century, their empire extended from the Indian Ocean to the gates of Vienna (which Suleiman the Magnificent besieged in 1529), and from the Crimea to the Barbary coast. As Suleiman himself declared in an inscription carved on the walls of the citadel of Bender in 1538:

I am God's slave and sultan of this world. By the grace of God I am head of Muhammad's community. God's might and Muhammad's miracles are my companions. I am Suleyman, in whose name the *hutbe* is read in Mecca and Medina. In Baghdad I am the shah, in Byzantine realms the Caesar, and in Egypt the sultan; who sends fleets to the seas of Europe, the Maghrib and India. I am the sultan who took the crown and throne of Hungary and granted them to a humble slave. The voivoda Petru raised his head in revolt, but my horse's hoofs ground him into the dust, and I conquered the land of Moldavia [53, p. 41].

In the following century, however, not only did the Ottomans fail to expand further but their advance was checked on several fronts. In the north-west, following a long and exhausting war fought in the closing years of the sixteenth century, their forces were expelled from the greater part of Hungary, while in the east, following an equally exhausting war, their troops were expelled from Azerbaijan and the Caucasus. In the Mediterranean, Ottoman naval supremacy

was undermined: in 1565 an Ottoman expeditionary force failed to take Malta, and in 1571 an Ottoman fleet was defeated in the Gulf of Lepanto. Effective control of the north African coast (Tripoli, Tunis and Algiers) was lost, while in the Black Sea marauding bands of Cossacks succeeded in raiding Sinope, and even the outskirts of Constantinople.

Nor was the structure of Ottoman power secure at home. For a complex variety of reasons – including a weakening of the authority of the Sultanate; the collapse of the *devshirme* (Christian slave levy) and *timar* (land holding) systems; inadequate tax revenue; overpopulation; loss of trade (in the second half of the sixteenth century the India trade was increasingly transferred to the Atlantic route); and widespread corruption – the heavily centralised system of government created by the early sultans came under increasing strain. So great did this strain become that in the closing years of the sixteenth century Ottoman authority in Anatolia all but collapsed, as armed bands of discontented soldiery, landless labourers and freebooters roamed the countryside, extorting money and goods from the people; while throughout the empire local chieftains, disaffected military commanders and provincial governors established more or less independent dynasties and regimes. As the English ambassador remarked in 1607, it appeared that the Ottoman Empire was ‘in great decline, almost ruined’ [53, p. 51].

The process of decline was not unremitting. In the second half of the seventeenth century, under the leadership of a series of reforming viziers, in particular Köprülü Mehmed Pasha (1656–61) and Köprülü Fazil Ahmed Pasha (1661–76), order was in part restored. Successful campaigns were fought in Transylvania, Poland and the Ukraine, though a second siege of Vienna failed in 1683. In the first half of the eighteenth century many fortresses, towns and territories previously lost to the empire were recovered, including the fortress of Azov on the Sea of Azov (1711), the Morea (1718), and Belgrade (1739).

Such occasional successes, however, proved insufficient to reverse the tide of Ottoman decline. In the Ukraine, the Russians continued their advance, and in the 1750s they constructed two great fortresses between Kiev and Ochakov, on the Black Sea. One of these, as the Sublime Porte (the Grand Vizier’s palace and centre of Ottoman government) was quick to point out, was just thirty hours’ marching time from the Turkish border, and the other a mere seventeen. In a war fought in 1768–74 the Russians inflicted a series of defeats on the Ottomans, in battles fought near the fortress of