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The Eastern Question: How the Three Powers of Russia, Great Britain, and France Oversaw the Collapse of the Ottoman Empire

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Abstract

The *Eastern Question* is a broad term that refers to the three main Eurasian powers of Russia, Great Britain, and France and how they planned to oversee the slow decay and eventual collapse of the Ottoman Empire to maintain a balance of power amongst themselves. Beginning in late 18th century and lasting until after the first World War, the *Eastern Question* would dominate these empires domestic and foreign policies. Foreign intervention by Russia, Great Britain, and France led to mass waves of nationalism, exploitation of Christianity populations, and direct military conflicts which led to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire collapsed after the first World War and fought off the occupying victorious allied powers of Great Britain, France, and Italy. They were successful in their fight for independence and established the Republic of Turkey as the legal successors to the Ottoman Empire.

Keywords: Anatolia, Balkans, Catholic, Islam, Constantinople, Crimean Peninsula, *Firman*, *Janissaries*, Levant, Mamluk, Mediterranean Sea, Muslim, Nationalism, Orthodox Christianity, Sublime Porte, Sultan, The Enlightenment Period, *Ulama*

Introduction

The *Eastern Question* is a broad term that refers to the world powers of the time Russia, Great Britain, and France, and how they planned to oversee the slow collapse of the Ottoman Empire to maintain a balance of power amongst themselves. Beginning in late 18th century and lasting until the first World War, the *Eastern Question* would be prevalent in these three powers foreign and domestic affairs. If one of these empires at the time was to achieve any influence over the Ottoman Empire's population, acquire territorial lands, or obtain their raw resources, they would be achieving too much power in the eyes of the other great powers. The history of the Ottoman Empire began in the year 1299 with just a small tribe of fellow Turkic people in Anatolia.¹ At its territorial peak it would stretch over all the Balkan Peninsula, modern day Turkey, the Levant, the upper Arabian Peninsula, and North Africa. By the late 18th century however, foreign intervention caused by direct military conflicts and wars of diplomacy would begin the slow collapse of the Muslim empire. The Ottoman Empire faced direct foreign intervention, the emergence of nationalism, and the exploitation of Christianity populations which led to the accelerated decline to the once great empire of six hundred years.

The Earliest Evidence of the *Eastern Question*

The emergence of the *Eastern Question* can first be seen as a result of the Ottoman defeat against the Russian Empire in the Russo-Ottoman war of 1768-1774. This is one of the earliest forms of evidence in the interventions of Ottoman sovereignty. The Russians and Ottomans clashed in five previous conflicts before this decisive war; however, the Russo-Turkish war of 1768 would be one of most impactful to the Ottomans. The overall cause of this war was for the Russian Empire to establish a better port in the Black Sea that would serve as a great defensive settlement for their navy, as well as maintain safe trade into the Mediterranean Sea. The Ottoman government was also extremely vocal in their displeasure about Russian influence in Poland. In 1764 Russian puppet ruler, Stanislaus Augustus Poniatowski, would assume the role of King in Poland which increased Russia's overall sphere of influence and territory. The Ottomans would eventually declare war on the Russians for not accepting their demands of immediate troop withdrawal from Poland in the fall of 1768. Throughout this war direct foreign intervention by European powers such as France, Austria, and Great Britain was evident because they all saw Russia's future victory as direct disruption to the balance of power. The European powers tried to mediate between the warring countries by offering peace, and possible solutions to maintain the status quo. Their ultimate fear was that Russia with Ottoman resources would become the supreme global power. The Ottomans would eventually be forced into defeat in very humiliating fashion given their dominant navy in the Black Sea, and overall size of their army. Russia would force the Ottoman government into signing the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca which would not only increase Russia's power and land, but give them future rights to dictate Ottoman rule in their own empire.

Forced into signing the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca in 1774, the Ottoman Empire would forfeit Russia a vast amount of concessions such as influence, money, and territory. This treaty

¹ Stephen Dale, *The Muslim empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals* (Cambridge, UK; New York : Cambridge University Press, 2010), 299.

would become a signal to the rest of the European kingdoms that the Ottoman Empire is no longer a global power, and calls attention to the *Eastern Question* given that it's the first time a foreign nation had direct intervention in the Ottoman government. Articles 21 and 3 in this treaty would be of major significance for current and future Russo-Ottoman affairs declaring that the Ottoman government must formally recognize the independence of the Crimean Khanate. The Khanate people, Tartars, had now formal independence from the Ottoman Empire, but in reality, they were a satellite state that would be formally annexed in 1783 by Russia. This loss of the Crimean Peninsula from the Ottomans, along with two other major key ports, Azov and Kerch, would give Russia access to the Black Sea and help establish a better trade route.

Articles 7, 8, and 9 in the treaty would have the most influence on the Ottoman Empire for future Russo-Ottoman relations. These Articles established Russia as the legal protector of the Orthodox Christian religion in the entire Ottoman Empire. Article 7 specifically demands that the "Ottoman State will respect the right of the Christian religion and protect its churches; The Russian ambassador will be able to consult on the protection of the helpers of the protection of the churches in every need."² For a foreign government to make such demands on how it must treat its citizens is extremely alarming in the global perspective on the overall state of the Ottomans. For the remaining years of the Ottoman Empire, Russia would now have legal authority for intervention to protect the Christian population. This would become most evident in future Balkan, and Greek independence movements.

The French Invasion of Egypt

The next case of foreign intervention would be the French occupation of Ottoman Egypt in 1798 by Commander-in-Chief of the French Army and Navy, Napoleon Bonaparte. Bonaparte invaded Alexandria on July 1st, 1798, with the goal of extending influence and power for the French Empire. This would be part of a three-year long campaign to protect French trade interests, establish a new colony, and become the dominant threat in the Mediterranean Sea.³ Bonaparte himself saw the Ottoman Empire as a decaying shadow of its former self and that Egypt was ripe for the taking. When discussing French Mediterranean policy, he claimed "The time is not far away that we will feel that, in order to truly destroy England, we must take Egypt. The vast Ottoman Empire, which dies every day...means that we can protect our commerce with the Levant."⁴ The French saw the Ottoman decline as one that was accelerating and decided that it was imperative for their success to deny Russia and the British any attempt to usurp Ottoman territories; especially one such as important as Egypt. France recently lost its most important colony in North America, *New France*, due to its defeat to the British in the French and Indian War and looked to Egypt as their next great protectorate.⁵ While France needed Egypt as a

² Wikimedia projelerine katkıda bulunanlar, "Küçük Kaynarca Antlaşması," Vikikaynak (Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., January 4, 2022).

³ Juan Cole, *Napoléon's Egypt: Invading the Middle East*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 13.

⁴ Gen. Jean-Pierre Doguereau, *Journal de L'expédition d'Egypte*, ed. C. de la Jonquière (Paris: Perrin et Cie., 1904), 69-70.

⁵ Daniel Baugh, *The Global Seven Years War, 1754-1763: Britain and France in a Great Power Contest*. (Routledge, 2021), 560.

colony, their invasion was also equally important for them to damage British economic interests.

Throughout the 19th century evidence of using religion as tool to overtake Ottoman provinces was extremely prevalent. Napoleon Bonaparte would be the first and claim himself as a Muslim man to justify his invasion. He issued a proclamation early into his invasion that all of France was Muslim, and that they were sent on behalf of the Ottoman Sultanate to free them of Mamluk tyranny.⁶ His decree was an attempt to persuade the religious scholars, the *Ulama*, and other intellectuals, but in fact angered them by disrespecting the Islamic faith. Al-Jabarti, who was a well-respected religious scholar that saw this invasion happen first-hand, took offence to this French storming for multiple reasons. He comments that the proclamation was in broken Arabic, that it was hard to understand, and that they disagree with all Muslims by rejecting the true mission of Muhammad the Prophet. Given Al-Jabarti's influence it's safe to assume most, if not all other religious scholars during this invasion felt the same. Napoleon failed to successfully invade on false religious narratives, but it would not be the last attempt in the Ottoman Empire. For the remaining years of the Ottoman Empire the three powers would use religion as a tool to further deteriorate it.

French occupation in Egypt would eventually be a failure for the French, however the social and cultural significance in French occupation would eventually spread through the Ottoman lands and accelerate the decline of the empire. One of the biggest effects the French had on the Egyptians was the implementation of western education, tools, and their military strength. Mamluk controlled Egypt was in a period of stagnation with political and economic corruption. When France, one of the most advanced countries in Europe, occupied Egypt they brought many new cultural, scientific, and advanced technologies. The printing press, dynamic modernity, commerce, science, hospitals and even archeology were all new to this traditional society.⁷ Many *Ulama* in the hindsight of French occupation took on more positive attitudes while negative feelings for the Ottoman rule grew. Islamic Historian Hasan al-Attar particularly grew very critical of Ottoman rule in the wake of French occupation. He saw the modern weapons and western strategy to destroy the Mamluks, which revealed the weakness of Muslim military power.⁸ French culture and modernity exposed to the Egyptians gave way for a loss of Egyptian solidarity with the Ottomans; beginning the birth of Egyptian nationalism and the creation of a modern Egypt under Mehmed Ali.

The Emergence of Mehmed Ali in Egypt

Known as the father of modern Egypt, Mehmed Ali established himself as one of the most important men in modern Islamic history while also becoming one of the biggest threats to the Ottoman Empire. Born in the Ottoman territory of Kavala in 1770, modern day Greece, Mehmed would not arrive in Egypt until 1801.⁹ The governor of Kavala, Mehmed's uncle, saw it best to elect Mehmed as Second Commander of 4,000 Albanian, and Ottoman mercenaries to

⁶ Jabartī, 'Abd al-Rahmān, *Napoleon in Egypt : Al-Jabartī's chronicle of the French occupation, 1798* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2004), 68.

⁷ Cole, *Napoléon's Egypt: Invading the Middle East*, 245.

⁸ Jabartī, 'Abd al-Rahmān, *Napoleon in Egypt : Al-Jabartī's chronicle of the French occupation, 1798*, 198.

⁹ Khaled Fahmy, *Mehmed Ali: From Ottoman Governor to Ruler of Egypt*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 3.

be sent to Cairo to fight off the French Empire. They were successful with the help of the British army to end the three-year occupation. The British empire desperately needed to defeat the French in Egypt due to their disruption of Mediterranean trade and joined forces with the Ottomans. What laid at the feet of Istanbul now was how to re-establish their hegemony over one of their most important provinces. The French withdrawal created an immense power vacuum. The French were gone, the Mamluks were weak and more dividend than ever. It was in this environment that Mehmed Ali would rise to power.

After the French withdrawal in 1801 the Ottoman Empire would try to implement multiple governors to Cairo to reestablish their authority over Egypt. During this time Mehmed Ali was working behind the scenes gaining popularity, loyal soldiers, and prestige. He would visit the three important factions of Cairo; the *Ulama*, merchants, and upper class to hear their grievances while establishing himself as a savior for the people.¹⁰ In total, the Ottomans would send three governors to take back control of Cairo, but each failed the same mission. To officially eliminate the Mamluks, establish economic stability, and to send the loyal Albanians under Mehmed Ali to Arabia to fight off more Ottoman separatists.¹¹ Each time it was more evident that the Ottomans were extremely weak and the only formidable force in Egypt was Mehmed. Each new Ottoman governor had an official document known as a *Firman*, which was a formal decree from the Ottoman Sultan giving reason and legitimacy to the chosen new governor.¹² Lacking political strength and overall might, The Ottoman Sultanate appealed to the masses and gave the task of governing Cairo to Mehmed Ali in 1805. By giving their *Firman* to Mehmed, this would set off a series of chain reactions that would eventually lead to the loss of the Ottoman province.

These new sets of circumstances caught the eye of the British who saw this as a perfect opportunity to carve out the Ottoman Empire and gain control of Egypt. The British were keeping a close eye on the new power vacuum left by the French and did not see Mehmed Ali as a threat. Possible acquisition of Egyptian territory was very important to the British because it would establish a better trade route, and a safer one, to India. India in 1807 was the most important economic province to the British and provided high amounts of trade, silk, and revenue provided by the East India Company.¹³ Egypt had been in disarray since Napoleon's invasion in 1798, so the British saw this as a chance to expand their empire. On March 27, 1807, 5,000 British troops invaded and conquered Alexandria while setting their sights east to Rosetta.¹⁴ In Rosetta however, they would fall into a trap set by the governor who was a supporter and friend of Mehmed. Although Mehmed was not a huge factor in destroying the British invasion he claimed victory and gained more fame amongst Egyptians as a result. Mehmed established and proved himself to be the true leader of Cairo, and Egypt. Obtaining more power, and stability in Egypt would lead to the Ottoman Sultanate to call for his help in

¹⁰ Henry Herbert Dodwell, *The founder of modern Egypt; a study of Muhammad 'Ali*, (Cambridge Eng. The University Press, 1931), 8.

¹¹ Dodwell, *The founder of modern Egypt; a study of Muhammad 'Ali*, 8.

¹² Khaled, *Mehmed Ali: From Ottoman Governor to Ruler of Egypt*, 25.

¹³ Karolina Hutková, *The English East India Company's Silk Enterprise in Bengal, 1750-1850: Economy, Empire and Business* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2019) 41.

¹⁴ Khaled, *Mehmed Ali: From Ottoman Governor to Ruler of Egypt*, 24.

the Greek War of Independence in the coming years. The Greek Revolution would prove very detrimental to the Ottoman Empire as it would lead to direct involvement of France, Russia and the British.

The Greek Crisis and Their War for Independence

It would be impossible to understand the Greek War of Independence without first understanding its religious context, and the Balkan regions relationship to the Ottoman Empire. In 1453 Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II had fulfilled the millennium long Muslim conquest goal of entering Europe by capturing the holy city of Constantinople from the Byzantium Empire. After Constantinople, now known as Istanbul, all other religions were technically inferior to Muslims in the Ottoman territories. They held most of the same rights as their fellow Ottoman Muslims but were still second-class. Even though the Ottomans dominated the Balkan region, it never had the full support and loyalty from its Christian subjects. The Christian church served as a role of tradition, literature, and a separate identity; while the fall of Constantinople and collapse of the Byzantium Empire was viewed as a tragedy that served as a binder to this community.¹⁵ These Orthodox Christians, along with Jews, and Roman Catholics, were always in close communication, and formed a great trade partnership with the rest of Europe due to their geographical location in the Balkans.

These Christians who had close ties with western Europe were slowly over time becoming more influenced by the events and progress of western civilization. This would come to an apex with the Enlightenment period and the French Revolution having extreme influence in the Balkan region. The idea of breaking free from your oppressor, democracy, and autonomy spoke directly to the Christian people. The first successful campaign of breaking from Ottoman rule would be achieved by the Greek people starting in 1821. This was a religious awakening and a form of nationalism in attempting to create an independent Christian nation. Although this was a Balkan region problem within the Ottoman Empire, the *Eastern Question* would be extremely prevalent with the three great powers influence on the outcome of the Greek Revolution. Increased intervention and initiatives control the Ottoman Christian subjects would be the precursor for not only the Greek Revolution, but many future Ottoman wars.

The Greek uprising began in the spring of 1821 with a call to all Christians in Greece to rise up against the long and cruel Muslim rule. The push for independence amongst the Greeks was now at its peak, with establishing a Greek national state paired with the Orthodox Christian Church as the ultimate goal.¹⁶ Revolution finally broke out in the Greek peninsula and the surrounding Islands. The Ottomans reaction to this would be severe and spark fury in all Christians in the region. For retaliation against the Greeks, on Easter Sunday, the Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church was publicly hanged in Istanbul. Throughout Istanbul any Greek, Christian, or suspected revolutionary was executed.¹⁷ These atrocities sparked massive outrage in western Europe, and Russia especially given that they were now the legal protector of all

¹⁵ Stevan Pavlowitch, *A history of the Balkans 1804-1945* (London; New York: Longman), 20.

¹⁶ Pavlowitch, *A history of the Balkans 1804-1945*, 46.

¹⁷ Pavlowitch, *A history of the Balkans 1804-1945*, 42.

Ottoman Orthodox Christians. France, Russia, and the British would now be drawn in to oversee the Greek revolution.

The Three Powers Drawn into the Greek Crisis

The Russian Empire had always seen itself as the successor to the Roman Empire and a champion of the Orthodox Christians. A clear example of this was the treaty of Küçük Kaynarca in becoming the fighter for the Ottoman Christian subjects. Russian Tsar Nicolas I even named one of his grandchildren after the famous Roman Emperor Constantine who was known for establishing Christianity as the official religion of the Romans.¹⁸ Russia in the past has already inserted itself in Ottoman politics and demanded the independence of Ottoman Christian subjects; so when the Greek uprising was in its early stages the Russian Empire began to again set themselves as the savior for the Orthodox Christians. They generously supported migration of the Greek people to southern Russia, gave tax exemptions, and immense land grants in recent annexed Ottoman territories.¹⁹ Russia delivered an ultimatum to the Ottoman Porte demanding their surrender and protection of Orthodox Christians. This Russian eight-day ultimatum demanded Ottoman troop withdrawal, restoration of Christian churches, and a guarantee of Russian commercial rights in the region.²⁰

The British Empire saw the Greek crisis as an extremely important foreign affair due to its highlighting of the Ottoman's weakness, Russian ambition to conquer Ottoman provinces, and its effect on British trade. In August 1822 British foreign policy began to slowly shift in favor of the revolting Greeks. They officially labeled the Greeks as a belligerent unified people fighting against unjust rule in the Ottomans and highlighting that this was in fact a Christian uprising.²¹ The purpose of this was to influence the public opinion in western Europe while also aligning themselves with the Orthodox Greeks. Even though they were championing the rights of Christians, their real motives were to oversee that the Russians did not get directly involved and gain more territory from the Ottomans. If Russia were to become absorbed into the revolution, the Ottomans would certainly lose, leading to more annexation of Ottoman land. Britain's foreign secretary, George Canning, noted that the intervention of Britain is a must because in one bite Russia would gobble Greece, then Anatolia in the next bite.²² To maintain an equilibrium amongst themselves and help maintain peace for safer trade relations, the three powers created The Treaty of London in 1827. The purpose of this treaty, which was pushed for by the British, was to serve as the mediator of the Greeks and advocated for the creation of a new independent Greek nation state that was still ruled by the Sultan. The Greeks accepted while the Ottomans declined. With the help of Mehmed Ali's dominant Egyptian army and navy, the Porte saw no need for compromise. Unfortunately for the Ottomans, this led to one

¹⁸ Theophilus Prousis, *Russian-Ottoman Borderlands*, (University of Wisconsin Press), 7.

¹⁹ Prousis, *Russian-Ottoman Borderlands*, 9.

²⁰ Prousis, *Russian-Ottoman Borderlands*, 13.

²¹ Jay Mens, *The Eastern Question as a Moral Question: European Order, Political Compromise, and British Policy Towards the Greek Revolution (1821–1828)*, 1-15.

²² Alexis Heraclides, *Humanitarian Intervention in the Long Nineteenth Century: Setting the Precedent*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 111

of their biggest military defeats in history at the Battle of Navarino by the new Greek protectors.

The Battle of Navarino and its Aftermath

The newly formed joint navies of the French, British, and Russia proved to be the superior power, and turned the tides of war in favor of the Greeks. Their orders were to set a defensive wall in the Bay of Navarino to prevent any arrival of new Ottoman troops and supplies by any means necessary.²³ The Ottoman-Egyptian navies were trapped on October 20th, 1827 when disaster struck in the bay. All 2,000 Egyptian-Ottoman naval boats were annihilated by the superior European navies. It would now be impossible for the three powers to deviate their support for the Greeks with such a devastating attack, sealing the fate for a future Greek victory. Only one month after this significant victory, the three powers held The Conference of Poros to determine the borders of Greece upon their looming victory.²⁴ For the three powers to oversee the independence of an Ottoman territory that had been under their domination for nearly three centuries, shows the lack of power the Muslim empire had. The Ottoman Porte yet still refusing to accept the idea of a new independent nation of Greece, decided to provoke the Russians. They decided to close The Dardanelles, which was a narrow natural straight and significant waterway connecting the Black Sea to the Aegean Sea. The Ottoman Sultan choosing to close this straight to the Russians directly refuted the agreement of peaceful Ottoman and Russian relations, outside of the Greek crisis, agreed upon by both parties at the Akkerman Convention in 1826.²⁵ This sparked a direct conflict and brought war between the two empires.

The Russo-Turkish war of 1828-1829 would be a short, one-sided victory that would further intensify the *Eastern Question* with the annexation of more Ottoman territory and highlighting the empires weakness. To begin the campaign, Russia opened with a proclamation declaring that this was not a war on Muslims or destruction of Istanbul, but rather to ensure the Porte would honor past agreements.²⁶ The French also sent troops to Greece to put more pressure on the Ottomans to come to a peaceful settlement while the Greek crisis had not yet been solved.²⁷ The conflict would eventually end with a Russian victory in a decisive war caused by multiple fronts in the Caucasus and the Balkans. The Ottomans being defeated once again by the Russian Empire were ultimately forced into signing the Treaty of Adrianople in 1829. The fallout of the treaty would be both humiliating, and extremely severe to the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire; they had to accept Greek sovereignty, grant Russia Orthodox Balkan territories, more provinces near the Black Sea, and multiple fortresses in Georgia.²⁸ In the treaty, one of the biggest awards to Russia was the mouth of the Danube river which begins from the Black Sea, and stretches all through the continent of Europe stopping near France and Germany. This acquisition would further strengthen Russia's presence in the Black Sea with its

²³ Heraclides, *Humanitarian Intervention in the Long Nineteenth Century: Setting the Precedent*, 118.

²⁴ Douglass Dakin, *The Greek Struggle for Independence, 1821-1833* (Berkley University of California Press, 1973), 257-259.

²⁵ Alexander Bitis, *The Russian Army's Use of Balkan Irregulars During the 1828-1829 Russo-Turkish War* (Franz Steiner Verlag), 538.

²⁶ Bitis, *The Russian Army's Use of Balkan Irregulars During the 1828-1829 Russo-Turkish War*, 542.

²⁷ Prousis, *Russian-Ottoman Borderlands*, 112.

²⁸ Prousis, *Russian-Ottoman Borderlands*, 112-113.

trade routes, and its mobility in Europe. This furthered Russian influence and power only gave more alarm to the British and French. The French after hearing of this massive sum granted to Russia pushed for the new Greek state to include Istanbul to try to secure a regional balance to the ever-growing Russian Empire.²⁹ This failed however, and the Greek War of Independence had officially been resolved. Without direct foreign intervention by the three powers, the Greek revolution would have failed.

Mehmed Ali and the Formation of Modern Egypt

In the following years after Greek Independence the Ottoman Empire would soon face its most dangerous and intrusive threats caused by Mehmed Ali of Egypt. After his entire naval fleet was destroyed in the Battle of Navarino, Mehmed saw the Ottomans dissolution as inevitable. He would be visited on multiple occasions by French and British diplomats trying to persuade him for his allegiance. A British consul-general even went to Cairo to persuade for friendly relations and to allude to the soon collapse of the Ottomans by stating “Do you not see that it is impossible to maintain the Porte...what can you do with a government that has lost the confidence of the people both within the capital and its provinces.”³⁰ Capitalizing on the recent constant failures of the Ottomans, Mehmed Ali launched his invasion on November 2nd 1831 into Syria with hopes to expand his own empire. Within seven months Mehmed Ali had captured the Syrian province including Damascus, Lebanon, Acre, and the holy city of Jerusalem which promoted the *Ulama* of Anatolia to declare him a rebel.³¹ The reasons for these chosen targets were their history of being rich in resources, and to create more separation between Egypt from Anatolia in the event the Ottomans were to attack Egypt. If the Ottomans were to ever strike Egypt, their forces would have to first go through these newly captured areas.

After the immediate and massive success in the Levant, Mehmed Ali set his sights on capturing the Ottoman Empire's heart, Istanbul. The Egyptian army marched all the way into central Anatolia and captured the city of Konya giving the opportunity to capture Istanbul with ease. In response to this immediate danger, the Porte requested British naval assistance, which they denied. The British denied assistance to the Ottoman because they did not wish to offend Mehmed Ali and saw him as a possible successor to the Ottoman Empire. Desperate for immediate aid, the Sultanate then asked the Russian Empire for help. Even after nearly a century of direct conflicts the Ottomans begged for Russia's help to deal with Mehmed Ali, and the latter was eager to help.³² The reason Russia was so anxious to help the Ottomans was that they saw this as an opportunity to carve out more Ottoman provinces, while exerting more influence in the region. For promised assistance against Mehmed Ali in the event of an attack on Istanbul, the Ottomans closed the Dardanelles River to French and British warships in the Treaty of Hünkâr İskelesi in 1833.³³ This treaty furthered Russia's control and dominance in the Black Sea. By directly excluding the other two great powers in Europe this had created an official European crisis. Mehmed Ali was now not only threatening the collapse of the Ottoman

²⁹ Prousis, *Russian-Ottoman Borderlands*, 115.

³⁰ Dodwell, *The founder of modern Egypt; a study of Muhammad 'Ali*, 104-105.

³¹ Khaled, *Mehmed Ali: From Ottoman Governor to Ruler of Egypt*, 86.

³² Khaled, *Mehmed Ali: From Ottoman Governor to Ruler of Egypt*, 86.

³³ Prousis, *Russian-Ottoman Borderlands*, 123.

Empire, but he was also threatening British and French influence while allowing Russia to gain more power. To end the Egyptian and Ottoman war, and to stop the conquest of Istanbul the Convention of Kütahya agreed to give Mehmed Ali the provinces of Egypt, Syria, Crete, and the Hijaz.³⁴ The possible conquest of Istanbul would have officially destroyed the Ottoman Empire sparking a European rush to acquire the spoils. Acquiring these significant territories allowed Mehmed Ali to begin to see that he had the power to secede officially from the Ottoman Empire and create his own dynasty.

What most affected the power equilibrium of Europe in this developing Egyptian crisis was how to prevent the Ottoman Empire collapse caused by Mehmed Ali's independence ambitions. Mehmed Ali now controlled the most important trade areas in the Mediterranean. Over the course of two years, the three powers would try to diplomatically solve the Egyptian crisis; just as they had overseen the success of independence for the Greeks. The three powers attempted to remove Mehmed diplomatically from the Levant, but he was very ridged and refused. The British then seeing no other course of action sent their armies to Syria and Alexandria to forcibly remove Mehmed in 1840.³⁵ Mehmed, realizing that he now had to face the superior European military and could possibly lose everything, agreed to the original proposal of the Convention of London. This treaty gave Egypt to Mehmed Ali which guaranteed hereditary succession, and no future Ottoman intervention could take place as the Sultan sent his final *firman* agreeing to give Egypt to Mehmed. For the second time in just eleven years the three powers had overseen the success of two major Ottoman provinces while further crippling the Ottoman Empires territorial integrity, and future economic possibilities.

The Crimean War

Following the signing of the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca in 1774, the Russian Empire had now established the legality for protection of the Ottomans Orthodox Christian populations. On numerous occasions they had already expanded into Ottoman territory to ensure their safeguarding such as in the Balkans, Caucasus, and Black Sea area. In France Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte came into power by way of a coup d'état in 1852 and began his campaign of overseeing the rights of the Ottoman's Latin Catholic population.³⁶ French Catholics had been a major contributor to putting him in power, so he had to ensure his followers that the Catholic holy city of Jerusalem would be under French protection. The French demanded of the Ottomans that Jerusalem be directly under French sovereignty to ensure Catholics safety and autonomy. Initially the Ottomans declined further foreign influence in their territory; however, the French sent a massive navy fleet to the Black Sea to intimidate Istanbul. The Ottomans then having no formidable strength to fight the French caved in and proclaimed the French as protectors of their Catholic subjects. This new proclamation by the Ottomans and the allowing of foreign warships in the Black Sea appeared to the Russians as a direct violation to the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca. Although the French seemed to be proclaiming themselves as protectors of Christianity, just as the Russians in the Greek War of Independence, this would be a false

³⁴ Khaled, *Mehmed Ali: From Ottoman Governor to Ruler of Egypt*, 87.

³⁵ Khaled, *Mehmed Ali: From Ottoman Governor to Ruler of Egypt*, 96-97.

³⁶ Candan Badem, *The Ottoman Crimean War (1853-1856)*, (Leiden : Brill, 2010), 65.

narrative. The colonization of Jerusalem would allow France to play a bigger role in the *Eastern Question* and acquire a key territory for trade in the Mediterranean.³⁷

By directly refuting the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca the Russian Empire decided this was cause for a direct military involvement. In the July of 1853, the Russian Empire invaded the autonomous Ottoman territories of Moldavia and Wallachia. Their invasion was not to directly attack the Ottomans and annex their regions, but rather it was a sign of strength of what could be done if they did not honor past agreements. Over the next two months British, French and Ottoman diplomacy would act to solve this new act of Russian aggression. The British aimed to maintain peace between all parties to preserve the status quo in Eurasia and prevent Russia from gaining more Ottoman territory. France and their newly chosen leader wanted to re-establish France as a global power, bring prestige it once had, and saw war as imperative. Russia at this point no longer saw the *Eastern Question* as what should be done to the Ottoman Empire, but rather he regarded the Turks as the *sick man* in Europe. In a private conversation with a British diplomat in the midst of the ongoing saber rattling, Russian Tsar Nicholas I talks of the Ottomans and states:

Turkey seems to be falling to pieces, the fall will be a great misfortune. It is very important that England and Russia should come to a perfectly good understanding ... and that neither should take any decisive step of which the other is not apprized. We have a sick man on our hands, a man gravely ill, it will be a great misfortune if one of these days he slips through our hands, especially before the necessary arrangements are made.³⁸

Russia saw the breaking of past Russo-Ottoman treaties as reason to begin the full dismantling of the Ottoman Empire and gain further territory in the east.

With peaceful negotiations amongst the three great powers proving of no avail, the Ottoman Empire declared war on Russia. Their goal in declaring war was to reestablish itself as a global power and to fight off the near century of Russian expansionist aggression. Istanbul and its subjects grew more angry and tired of imperialist Russia constantly intervening in their sovereignty. The powerful and influential *Ulama* of Istanbul even sent petitions to the Ottoman Sultan in favor of declaring a *Jihad* on Russia.³⁹ The Sultan having grown fatigued of Russian intervention declared war on September 29th, 1853 stating that the Ottomans must expel the foreign invader while protecting their Christian and Muslim subjects alike.⁴⁰ For the next several months, to the shock of all Eurasian powers, the Ottomans were fighting courageously and winning early on. Towards the middle of 1854 however, Russia began to be the clear superior military with gaining more victories. Not wanting to see the dissolution of the Ottomans and for Russia to reap the entire eastern empire, a Franco-Ottoman-British alliance was signed in March 1854.⁴¹ Superior numbers, weapons, and multiple war fronts in Crimea and the Caucasus eventually led to the defeat of the Russian Empire who pursued for peace in 1856.

³⁷ David Goldfrank, *The Origins of the Crimean War* (London: Routledge, 1994) 76.

³⁸ Harold Temperley, *England and the Near East: The Crimea* (Routledge, London, 1936), 272.

³⁹ Virginia Aksan, *Ottoman wars, 1700-1870: An Empire Besieged* (Oxon, England; New York, New York: Routledge, 2013), 442

⁴⁰ Aksan, *Ottoman wars, 1700-1870: An Empire Besieged*, 442-443

⁴¹ Aksan, *Ottoman wars, 1700-1870: An Empire Besieged*, 444

In March of 1856 the empires finalized the Treaty of Paris to officially end the three-year war. This treaty set the warring countries boundaries back to pre-war lines and to preserve the independence and integrity of the Ottoman Empire.⁴² While the Turks did win this war, the *Eastern Question* would be evident in this treaty as well. Article 8 tries to prevent further annexation of future Ottoman territory stating none of the signing powers can attack Turkey or intervene in its affairs without consulting the other powers first.⁴³ This clause helped the British the most who were not ready for the aftermath of the liquidation of the Ottomans upon their collapse, while taking future Russian imperial aims away. This treaty was a complete humiliation and loss for the Russian Empire with domestic turmoil soon to arise out of this failure. Along with losing territory, the Russians would now have less influence in the Black Sea. The Treaty of Paris agreed for the Black Sea to be demilitarized to help all of the signing powers with fair economic trade. For the French the war was a complete success with establishing prestige again in Europe and becoming the protectors of the Ottoman Catholic subjects. For the British while they did not gain anything directly the survival of the Ottoman Empire was what they aimed for. Ottoman territory, and resources staying out of Russia's control was a victory in itself.

Aftermath of the Crimean War and the Eastern Crisis

While the Ottoman Empire did feel immense pride in their victory of defeating the aggressive Russians in the Crimean War, they would soon face severe economic issues due to their pact with the western European powers. To pay for the Crimean War, the Ottoman Porte took foreign loans from both Britain and France. This was the first time in the Ottomans' history to borrow money from another country but they saw it as a necessity to fight off the invading Russians.⁴⁴ With immense loans, a severe drought in Anatolia in 1873, followed by extreme flooding and winter in 1874, the Porte declared they were officially unable to pay their loans to the west. This led to the Porte issuing higher taxes in its European Balkan Christian provinces and took violent measures when the peasantry could not pay.⁴⁵ Unable to pay the new higher taxes, and growing tired of Turkish violent measures, the peasantry revolted in the Ottoman province of Herzegovina. It's important to note that the Muslim peasantry for the most part stayed loyal and understood these unfortunate new economic strains. Catholic and Orthodox Christians, however, formed the majority of this peasant insurgency.⁴⁶ This pattern is most reminiscent to earlier in the century when the Greeks revolted to form their own Christian province fueled by nationalistic ideas. While the Herzegovina peasant revolt was ultimately caused by higher taxes and violence, Orthodox Christianity over the past century in the Balkans had grown tired of Ottoman Muslim dominance. The need to form their own Christian state never went away. Over the years through Russian intervention, Greek inspiration, and western influence, the Orthodox Christian population in the Balkans grew more anxious for a creation of their own state.

⁴² Harold Temperley, Took picture, *The Treaty of Paris 1856 and its Execution: journal of modern history* (The University of Chicago Press, 1932), 523

⁴³ Temperley, *The Treaty of Paris 1856 and its Execution: Journal of Modern History*, 523.

⁴⁴ Aksan, *Ottoman wars, 1700-1870: An Empire Besieged*, 439.

⁴⁵ Pavlowitch, *A history of the Balkans 1804-1945*, 108.

⁴⁶ Pavlowitch, *A history of the Balkans 1804-1945*, 109.

The Eastern Crisis

With the Herzegovina uprising quickly spreading to neighboring Bulgaria with no signs of stopping, foreign intervention would take advantage of the growing sense of nationalism in the Balkans. Serbia and Montenegro declared war on the Ottoman Empire in July 1876 in hopes of creating more Christian Balkan states.⁴⁷ With the recent Sultans death, and ongoing economic issues, these declarations of war could not have come at a worse time for the Ottomans. Seeing an opening to reassert itself in the Balkans and regain influence in the Black Sea, the Russian Empire declared war on the Ottomans in April 1877 creating the 5th Russo-Turkish war since 1768.⁴⁸ The British once again seeing the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire as too soon and to prevent a race to the spoils by the Eurasian powers, threatened intervention on behalf of the Ottomans stopping further Russian assault who were just seven kilometers of Istanbul. Facing no possible victory, the Ottomans were forced into defeat and signed the Treaty of Berlin in 1878.

Seeing now the *sick man of Europe* at its lowest point, and with the complete breakup of the Ottomans as inevitable, the British decided to take advantage. Just months before the Treaty of Berlin in 1878, the British and the Ottomans had a secret agreement known as the Cyprus Convention on May 23rd. This pact stated that the British would support the Ottomans best interests in the Balkans at the Berlin conference in return for the British occupation of Cyprus, and to serve as the protectors for Armenian Christians in east Anatolia.⁴⁹ The role of the protector of Ottoman Christian subjects has been a dominant tool in the *Eastern Question* previously assumed by Russia, and with France this strategy would again be used. This was the first time the British would use this role to exert direct influence in the Ottoman Empire while creating a base point in Anatolia to prevent future Russian aggression. The island of Cyprus would prove to be an extremely useful province to further establish British dominance in Mediterranean trade and allow for safer trade to British India.

The Treaty of Berlin

Unfortunately for the Ottomans, the Treaty of Berlin would symbolize the beginning of the end for the once great Muslim empire. The British in fact lied and did not represent the best interests of the Ottomans and pursued British interests exclusively. The British goal, as seen throughout the entirety of the *Eastern Question*, was to maintain an equilibrium amongst the Eurasian powers, especially keeping Russia from achieving too much territory.⁵⁰ They were successful in their mission of containing further Russian annexation as Russia only acquired a minor strip of land near the Danube River. Under this treaty the newly independent states of Romania, Serbia, Eastern Roumelia and Montenegro would officially be recognized, and the autonomy of Bulgaria would be established resulting in the loss of almost the entire Balkan

⁴⁷ Haken Yavuz, *War and Diplomacy: The Russo Turkish War of 1877-1878 and the Treaty of Berlin* (University of Utah Press, 2011) 23.

⁴⁸ Yavuz, *War and Diplomacy: The Russo Turkish War of 1877-1878 and the Treaty of Berlin*, 24.

⁴⁹ Yavuz, *War and Diplomacy: The Russo Turkish War of 1877-1878 and the Treaty of Berlin*, 25-26.

⁵⁰ Yavuz, *War and Diplomacy: The Russo Turkish War of 1877-1878 and the Treaty of Berlin*, 26.

peninsula from the Ottomans.⁵¹ Austria-Hungary would occupy Bosnia and Herzegovina extending their territorial dominance in southern Europe and in the Balkans.⁵² For the Ottoman Empire this treaty was detrimental to its territorial sovereignty and its trade network. The Treaty of Berlin allowed for the three powers to completely reconstruct the Balkan peninsula which had been under Ottoman rule for over three centuries, further deteriorating the empire.

The Remaining Years of the Ottoman Empire

Over the next half century, the Ottomans would find themselves pulled into major European conflicts such as multiple Balkan Wars, a war with the Italian Empire, and eventually World War I in 1914. The effects each time allowed for a foreign power to devour Ottoman territory and further cripple them. The Ottomans went through the rest of their years after the Treaty of Berlin trying to combat the *Eastern Question*: establishing modern political reforms, eliminating their long-standing traditional army of slaves the *Janissaries*, trying to create a democratic constitution multiple times, and going through their own period of Muslim Turkish Nationalism.⁵³ After World War I, however, the victorious Allied Powers occupied Istanbul, and the remaining territory of the Ottomans. This occupation of imperialist powers appeared to have brought an end to the *Eastern Question* and the Ottoman Empire and the redrawing of its borders would soon be underway. The Turkish Nationalists Movement, however, declared their own war of Independence in 1919 and sought to establish their own country of proud Turks free from foreign intervention. The Turkish Nationalist Movement was successful with combating western occupation in a very bloody war which allowed for the creation of the modern-day Turkey under the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923.⁵⁴ This treaty fully guaranteed the sovereignty and recognition of the Republic of Turkey as the legal successor-state to the Ottoman Empire.

Conclusion

The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire was a product of the *Eastern Question* where the three powers oversaw the collapse of the once great Muslim empire. All three empires used religion as a tool to create grounds for a war, or to create a treaty to oversee Ottoman Christian subjects. While they appeared as Orthodox Christian or Catholic protectors, their true intentions were to create more influence and extended their empire. The three powers were especially effective in taking advantage of nationalist movements, the Christian nationalist movements in Greece in 1821, and the Balkans in 1878. Each newly acquired territory from the Ottomans further increased one of the three powers influence in Europe, allowed for the accumulation of more resources, and created safer trade for the European empires. The *Eastern Question* is important to world history for several reasons: It shows that the collapse of the Ottoman Empire could have been drastically different had foreign intervention not been the key driving force, it shows how significant of a role religion and nationalism can play in nations, and that the war of diplomacy amongst nations is one of utmost value.

⁵¹ Marriott, J.A.R., *The Remaking of Modern Europe: From the Outbreak of the French Revolution to the Treaty of Berlin, 1789-1878* (England: Macmillan; Methuen, 1912), 171.

⁵² Ana Siljak, *The Balkans*, (Chicago: London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001), 6.

⁵³ Feroz Ahmad, *The Young Turk Revolution* (Sage publications Inc, 1968), 19-22.

⁵⁴ Edward Erickson, *The Turkish War of Independence* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2021), 335-336.

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