**The Eastern Question: 19th century**

The most insoluble and dangerous topic of European diplomacy during the 19th century acquires a broad name - the Eastern Question. It refers to the danger posed by the weakness of the Ottoman empire, with the sultans in Istanbul proving unable to control the vast empire assembled by their more warlike ancestors. The 'Porte', also known as the 'Sublime Porte', becomes a familiar element in western diplomacy during the century. It is the term conventionally used for the Turkish government, being a translation into French of the phrase used by the Turks themselves for the 'lofty gateway' which gives access to the sultan and his officials.

The intrinsic danger in the Eastern Question is not the internal threat posed to the sultans. It is the risk of war between the western European powers (Britain, France, Austria, Russia and subsequently Germany) as each nervously tries to ensure that none of the others gains any advantage from the potential crumbling of Turkey. The greatest fear in western Europe is that Russia, Turkey's nearest neighbour, will continue the process (begun successfully during the 18th century) of expanding south in the Black Sea region and will possibly even reach Istanbul - a gateway of immense strategic importance between the Balkans and Asia.

Russia is closely involved in the two Balkan liberation movements of the early 19th century, in Serbia and Greece. Russian imperial ambitions in this area benefit from a cloak of idealism. The majority of Christians living under Ottoman rule are Orthodox rather than Catholic. As the leading Orthodox power, Russia can claim a natural right to their protection - a fact recognized by Turkey in the 1774 treaty of Kuchuk Kainarji. The weakness of the Ottoman empire (a state described by the tsar Nicholas I in 1844 as 'the sick man of Europe') provides constant opportunity for western involvement. And the presence of Christians offers a permanent pretext to take an active interest in Turkish affairs.

To add to these other elements, there is one all-important means of achieving power in the region. It derives from the geographical features linking the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. A narrow strait, the Dardanelles, gives access from the Aegean to the sea of Marmara. Another narrow strait, the Bosphorus, leads on past Istanbul and into the Black Sea. Warships can pass through these channels only by agreement with Turkey or by controlling the banks on either side. Yet the freedom to do so is a major strategic advantage. The Straits become the military and the diplomatic focal point of the Eastern Question.
The Straits Convention: 1841

In 1833 Russia wins a hidden advantage over the other European powers. In a secret clause of a treaty signed at Unkia Skelessi the Turks grant an eight-year agreement that in a crisis the Straits will be closed to all warships except those of Russia. By the time the eight years are up, Russia is more concerned to ensure peace in the region than to gain an advantage. Like the other western European powers, the tsar feels that the safest course is to prop up the sick man of Europe rather than risk dismemberment. The result of this consensus is the Straits Convention, agreed in London in 1841 between Britain, France, Prussia, Austria, Russia and Turkey.

There are two main agreements in the Straits Convention. One is that no nation's warships will pass through the Straits in time of peace. This is a major concession by Russia, since it is much more important for her ships to be able to get out of the Black Sea and into the freedom of the Mediterranean than for those of any other nation to make the opposite journey. Indeed only by this route can Russia's Baltic and Black Sea fleets make contact. The other important clause in the convention is that no nation will seek to have exclusive influence within the Ottoman empire.

In the general spirit of goodwill in 1841 the Russian tsar, Nicholas I, informs the Austrians that he sees the Danube as a dividing line between them. His interests are only in the Danubian principalities north of the river. The rest of the Balkans, down to the Adriatic, he regards as their concern. This attitude suggests a spirit of European cooperation but not much underlying respect for Ottoman rights. Nevertheless it preserves peace in the Balkans for more than a decade. Unrest during the revolutionary year of 1848 is suppressed by joint action between Russia and Turkey. But cooperation is disrupted from 1852, when the old issue of Christians within the Ottoman empire sets in train a process leading to the Crimean War.

The Holy Places: 1852

Of the many Christian sites within the Ottoman empire, by far the most significant are those in Palestine - in particular the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. In recent decades, as a result of pressure from Russia, the Turks have granted custody of these churches to Orthodox priests, to the exclusion of Catholics. But early in 1852 Napoleon III (starting a ten-year presidency of France) sees in this issue an opportunity to cut a dash on the international stage in the manner of his famous uncle, while at the same time pleasing his Roman Catholic constituents in France. He demands that the sultan (Abd-ul-Mejid I) restore Roman Catholic rights in the Holy Places.

Napoleon's demands provoke a strong diplomatic response from Russia. An emissary arrives in Istanbul to insist that the sultan follows the letter of the Kuchuk Kainarji treaty, allowing Russia to protect all Christians in the Ottoman empire. This in turn alarms the western European powers, who fear that Russia is trying to re-establish a special and exclusive influence over Turkey in defiance of the terms of the Straits Convention. In a familiar pattern, small precautionary steps soon escalate into an increasingly dangerous mood of confrontation.

The steps to war: 1853-1854

News that Russia's Black Sea fleet has been put on alert at Sebastopol is followed, in June 1853, by the despatch of British and French fleets to a rendezvous just outside the Dardanelles. Early in July the Russians take the opportunity, as on so many previous occasions, of occupying the Danubian principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia.

Intense diplomacy is undertaken to try and avert war, until the Turks themselves force the issue. In August the sultan announces that he will himself now care for the Christians in his empire, excluding even the Russians from this role. In October, sensing the chance of British and French support against his
traditional enemy, the sultan takes a further step. He gives Russia two weeks to withdraw from Moldavia and Wallachia. When they fail to do so, he declares war. The Crimean War has begun.

A Turkish army crosses the Danube in an attempt to liberate the principalities. The Russian fleet responds by destroying a Turkish squadron at Sinop on the southern shore of the Black Sea.

After several weeks of hesitation, Britain and France decide to send their warships through the Straits with the intention of confining the Russian fleet to its base at Sebastopol. They enter the Black Sea early in January 1854. This clear challenge to Russia is followed by an ultimatum that tsar Nicholas I must withdraw his armies from Wallachia and Moldavia. Receiving no response, Britain and France formally join Turkey’s war against Russia in March 1854.

In spite of this, the early summer of 1854 is spent in continuing diplomacy. The allies are eager to involve Austria in their joint effort against Russia. They succeed to the extent that Austria, as the immediate neighbour of the principalities, demands in June that Russia withdraw from Wallachia and Moldavia. The tsar calls everyone’s bluff by agreeing to do so. In August the Russian armies pull back, thus belatedly fulfilling the terms of the earlier British and French ultimatum. There is no reason for the war not to end at this point except that the British and French governments, having whipped up public opinion, need a victory. They have already decided to destroy the Russian naval base at Sebastopol.

**Balaklava and Inkerman: 1854**

A British and French army lands near Sebastopol in September 1854. During the next eight weeks there are three battles with Russian forces, at the river Alma in September, at the allies’ supply port of Balaklava in October and at Inkerman on the heights just outside Sebastopol in November. Alma is an allied victory but brings little advantage in the central purpose of seizing the fortified port of Sebastopol. The other two battles are inconclusive, with very heavy casualties - Balaklava also being famous in British history for the disastrous Charge of the Light Brigade.

The failure of the allies to capture Sebastopol by the time of the engagement at Inkerman, in November, has a significant result. The British and French troops must dig in for a bitterly cold winter if they are not to be withdrawn in ignominious failure. The recent heavy casualties and the harsh conditions begin a tale of horror which has often been matched in previous wars. But this time there is a difference. Recent advances in communication mean that the details of the war are available within days, in graphic detail, in British homes.

**The reporters’ war: 1854-1856**

Recent developments in many fields make the Crimean War the first modern war, in the sense that the public at home becomes rapidly and intensely aware of what is going on at the front. The first important changes are in transport and printing. When the editor of the Times in London decides to send a reporter out to join the British army in the Crimea in April 1854, he knows that reports will get back to London (with the best available combination of ship, train and electric telegraph) faster than from any previous conflict. And his mechanized steam presses will be able to supply a large readership with news of unprecedented immediacy.

His chosen reporter is William Howard Russell, whom the Crimea soon transforms into a national figure - Russell of the Times. Appalled at what he sees in British army camps and hospitals, Russell makes himself intensely unpopular with the authorities by describing the conditions in vivid detail. His account of British patients at Scutari, in September 1854, compares their condition unfavourably with the French hospitals. He makes a Passionate plea for ‘devoted women’ to come out from England to tend them. It is a measure of the new immediacy that one devoted woman, destined to be even more famous than Russell,
responds directly to his words. Florence Nightingale sails for the Crimea, with thirty-eight nurses, in October.

The Crimean war lives with similar immediacy in images. It is the first war assignment undertaken by a photographer. Early in 1855 a Manchester publisher, Thomas Agnew, decides to send a photographer to the front. He selects Roger Fenton, who becomes a familiar figure of great curiosity to the troops. He travels round in a converted delivery vehicle with the words 'Photographic Van' painted on the side. Inside is the dark room where he develops his large glass plates. Needing exposure times of up to twenty seconds, Fenton's photographs are mainly of soldiers posed among the paraphernalia of war in the Crimean landscape. They are published by Agnew in five portfolios before the end of 1855.

Meanwhile a British print dealer, Dominic Colnaghi, has used the same approach in a more traditional art form. He sends out the artist William Simpson, who arrives at Balaklava in November 1854 and stays with the army until the fall of Sebastopol in September 1855. Advances in printing mean that Simpson's watercolours can be rapidly produced in London as realistic tinted lithographs. Two series are issued in 1855-6 under the title The Seat of War in the East. Simpson, with his pencil and brush, can capture the drama and pathos of war in a way not yet available to Fenton. His picture of Florence Nightingale among the wounded at Scutari, published in April 1856, contributes to her legend.

**Treaty of Paris: 1856**

The siege of Sebastopol drags on painfully through the winter of 1854-5 and the following spring and summer. Eventually the Russians abandon the city, in September 1855. But the allied forces are in too weak a condition to pursue them northwards into Russia. With little achieved, but with another winter approaching, everyone is inclined to peace. Talks begin in Paris in February 1856.

The resulting treaty removes much of Russia's special position in relation to Turkey. The joint European powers will from now on safeguard both the Holy Places and the Danubian principalities. The Straits Convention of 1841 is restored, but Turkey and Russia alike are to be limited to minimal naval forces in the Black Sea (a restriction lifted in 1871).

*Source: Bamber Gasoine, HistoryWorld.net*