

The Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878

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The war that broke out between Russia and the Ottoman Empire in 1877 contained many of the same elements that characterized World War I. The Russo-Turkish War of 1877 was a result of the spread of nationalistic thought into the Balkan region, which was barely contained by the Ottoman Empire, an empire that had long been deemed the "Sick Man of Europe." Mix in traditional Russian aspirations with a complicated set of European politics and alliances, and the result is a recipe for a violent ethnic struggle backed up by great powers. To understand the importance of the war, it is vital to not only understand the immediate results of the war but its origins and lasting effects into the following decades and beyond.

The Russo-Turkish War originally ignited in the Balkan region, an area that contained the Slavic people of the Eastern Orthodox religion that Russia saw itself as a protector of. To understand why Russia had involved itself in the affairs of the Slavic people of the Balkan region, it is helpful to look back to the early relationship between the Russians and Ottomans. The Russian Empire and the Turkish Ottoman Empire have been at odds with each other going as far back as 1568, when the Ottomans turned their armies towards the growing Duchy of Muscovy under Ivan the Terrible. Ivan's grandfather and predecessor, Ivan III had married Sophia, a niece of the last Byzantine Emperor and had claimed the

inheritance of the East Roman Empire.¹ This view of Russia as the protector of the Eastern Orthodox religion has influenced Russia's affairs for hundreds of years. In fact, promoting the rights of the Eastern Orthodox Christians of the Ottoman Empire was an immediate cause of the Crimean War (1853-1856), though there were other factors involved which played a large role in the conflict that would become very important for setting the stage for the Russo-Turkish War in 1877.

In March of 1856, Russia sued for peace in the Crimean War. In attempts to keep Russia from gaining lands at the expense of Ottoman lands, Britain and France had allied itself with the Ottomans and had laid siege to Sevastopol. The resulting Treaty of Paris led to several key components that affected the Russians, including the neutralization of the Black Sea, which involved dismantling the Russian fleet and destruction of its Sevastopol fortifications. It also made the Danubian principalities independent from Russia, ultimately creating the nation of Romania. On top of this, the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire was guaranteed by Great Britain, France and Austria.

Despite winning the war, the Ottoman Empire continued to decline and was severely hurt by the financial costs of the war. Of course, this made controlling its Balkan provinces increasingly difficult. Throughout the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire had suffered from a weak, outdated army despite the efforts of Selim III and Mahmud II in the early part of the century to modernize their army to the opposition of the traditional Janissary forces used by the Ottomans. Because of the Ottoman's inability to police its European provinces, local *ayans*, who were often little more than very successful bandits, were appointed to attempt to bring them into the Ottoman system legitimately.

¹ Patrick Balfour Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries: The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Empire*. (New York: W. Morrow, 1977), 262.

This often did nothing except legitimize their thievery and rallied Christians, Muslims and Jews to despise these leaders.

By the time of the Crimean War, let alone the Russo-Turkish War in 1877, autonomy had already been granted through a select few European regions in the Ottoman Empire. In 1804, the Serbs had revolted against the Janissaries and their *ayan* allies which eventually turned into a revolt against the Ottoman Empire itself. Though Russia had promised to aid the Serbs, this promise had been barely fulfilled because of the simultaneous Napoleonic Wars that Russia had been engaged in. Though the Ottomans retook Serbia in 1813, they were lenient in their treatment of the Serbs because of Russian pressure, giving the Serbs much local autonomy. In the Convention of Akkerman of 1826, Muslims were forcibly evicted from Serbia and by the end of the Russo-Turkish War of 1828-1829, Serbia had been granted full autonomy as its own principality. Both actions had been a result of the pressure from Russia. The Russo-Turkish War in 1828-1829 had been prompted by the Greek Revolution started in 1821 against tax collectors, which had turned into a revolt against the Turks themselves and became a war primarily of Christians against Muslims. Though the Ottomans called upon Muhammad Ali of Egypt to put down the Greek Revolt, the situation became too much for the Ottomans to handle when a wave of pan-Hellenism had spread across Europe, bringing about a pro-Greek coalition of English, French and Russian forces against the Ottomans.²

By the end of the Crimean War in 1856, Greece was its own independent kingdom and Serbia and Romania had both been recognized as autonomous states nominally part of the Ottoman Empire. Between all these regions' battles for independence it was the Serbs and Greeks who had waged not just a war for

² Justin McCarthy, *The Ottoman Peoples and the End of Empire*. (London: Arnold, 2001), 42-44.

independence and autonomy but a war against the Muslims of southeast Europe. These regions had become ethnically homogenous which were fertile breeding grounds for nationalistic thought. Nationalism had not only spread throughout Europe in the 19th century but a specific brand of nationalism had grown in the last decades, especially among the Russian intelligentsia, leading up to the 1870s known as Pan-Slavism, a version of nationalism that propagated the idea of a unified Slavic state, often imagined as being led by the Russian Empire.

The Ottomans' financial situation had been worsening for at least twenty years when in 1873, the Ottomans faced widespread drought and famine on the Anatolian mainland which lasted for years. In fact, the situation was so desperate that "wolves were roving the suburbs of Istanbul and devouring passers-by, sheep and oxen were perishing on a disastrous scale, men were starving in the villages and dying in the streets without burial."³ It was this situation that made it necessary for the Ottomans to enforce harsher tax collection, including in the European provinces of the empire. In July of 1875, a revolt had begun in Herzegovina, a region also affected by a bad harvest and tax-farming which spread to Bosnia. What started off as a united revolt against tax collectors, turned into a nationalist movement when Serbs from both Serbia and Bosnia entered the war, supplying the rebels with men, money, and guns. These Serbians turned their aim from government officials to attacking whole Muslim villages, ultimately changing the revolution in an ethnic civil war. By December of 1875, the League of the Three Emperors, an alliance between Wilhelm I's Germany, Franz Joseph I's Austria and Alexander II's Russia, demanded that the Ottomans lower taxes, end tax farming and institute other reforms. The Ottomans complied

³ Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries*, 508-509.

but by this point, it was too late. Tax reforms would not solve a dispute of nationalist ideals.⁴

On May 2nd, 1876, the rebellion had spread to Bulgaria in the cities of Panagiuuriste, Koprivshita and Klisura. These rebels were also nationalists. They attacked Muslim villages and slaughtered an estimated 1000 Muslims. With regular Ottoman forces occupied in Herzegovina and Bosnia, the Ottomans recruited from local Muslim forces called Bashi Bozuks, as well as Circassian forces. Both groups fought not only the rebels with ferocity but massacred innocent Bulgarians as well. The Circassians, an ethnic group originally from the Caucasus region that had previously been brutally driven out of their homeland by Russia and into the Ottoman Empire, had fought with extreme brutality against the Bulgarian people and had often denied Ottoman orders for restraint.⁵

To complicate the whole situation, matters in Turkey became so bad, Sultan Abdul-Aziz I was forced to abdicate on May 30th, in place of Mehmed Murad V who himself, only lasted until August 31st when Sultan Abdul Hamid II took his place after a palace revolt. Meanwhile, on July 2nd, Serbia, followed by Montenegro, officially declared war on the Ottoman Empire.⁶ Between all these issues, it seemed very apparent that the Ottoman Empire was on its way to complete dissolution. Despite this, the Ottomans succeeded in defeating the Serbs in Serbia and Bosnia while simultaneously, throughout the summer, suppressing the revolts in Bulgaria through the use of the Bashi Bozuks and Circassians. Unfortunately for the Ottomans, the atrocities committed by both groups against the Bulgarians brought international attention to the rebellions. Despite the immunity to popular opinion in which Russian Tsars typically have held, the Tsar had been expected to intervene because of Pan-Slavic sentiments

⁴ McCarthy, *The Ottoman Peoples*, 45.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

among the Russian intelligentsia. Not looking to be involved in a war with Russia, the Ottomans complied with Russian pressure to sign an armistice with Serbia on October 31st, 1876, just as the Ottomans were ready to march their armies on Belgrade. It was through the League of the Three Emperors that the Berlin Memorandum was created, demanding reforms that would give much more autonomy to the European provinces in the Ottoman Empire. Though the Ottomans could accept an armistice that would prevent the Ottomans from retaking an autonomous Serbia, they would not accept Russian pressures to divide the European provinces into autonomous Christian states which the Ottomans understood would have been under Russian influence and soon completely independent. It was their denial of this Russian demand that would lead to the Russo-Turkish War in the coming year.

For the purposes of providing a balance of power in Europe against Russian aspirations, British foreign policy had traditionally been in favor of maintaining the integrity of the borders of the Ottoman Empire. Benjamin Disraeli had been a fervent supporter of the Ottomans but despite this, Disraeli could do little to help the Ottomans once the news of the atrocities in Bulgaria had swayed British public opinion against them. Disraeli's major political opponent, William Ewart Gladstone had waged an intense political campaign against the Turks, denouncing their government and proposing solutions that they lose all power over their European provinces. Disraeli had condemned Gladstone's agitation as dangerous to, not only Britain's interest in Turkey but to Europe as a whole. Unfortunately, it was Disraeli's words and not that of the British foreign secretary, Lord Derby, which Sultan Abdul Hamid took as a cue of British foreign policy. This ultimately led Abdul Hamid to believe that Britain would back up the Ottomans in a war against Russia, as they had in the Crimean War, if that is what it came down to. When Britain called for a meeting among

the powers known as the "Constantinople Conference," these words would influence Abdul Hamid to reject the proposals to create autonomous states out of Bulgaria.⁷

Knowing they were about to enter into war but looking to avoid the past mistakes of the Crimean War, Russia did not want to enter into a conflict with the Ottomans while fighting the major powers of Europe simultaneously. To ensure this, Russia's first move was to reach out to Germany and ask that they return the military backing Russia provided to Germany in its wars in 1866 and 1870 and that they also keep the Austrian-Hungarian Empire neutral through threat of war. The German Chancellor, Otto Von Bismarck, was dedicated to a foreign policy that focused on a balance of power within Europe, and though he was content with the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire, Bismarck refused to keep the Austrians neutral through threats.⁸ To appease Austria, Russia entered into an agreement with Austria on January 15th, 1877, known as the Budapest Convention, in which Austria agreed to remain neutral in the coming war in return for Bosnia.⁹ Russia had also tried to gain the support of France, but France did not want to jeopardize the patronage that it received from both Britain and Russia and pleaded that they were in no condition to be involved in another war after their devastating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870.¹⁰ As for Britain, the popular opinion within the nation kept Great Britain from being able to defend the Ottomans. The only thing that British politicians like Disraeli could do is condemn Russia's attacks from afar. It is because of these politics that the

⁷ Kinross, Patrick Balfour. *The Ottoman Centuries: The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Empire*. New York: W. Morrow, 1977. 518-519.

⁸ Taylor, A. J. P. *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848-1918*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954. 239-241.

⁹ McCarthy, Justin. *The Ottoman Peoples and the End of Empire*. London: Arnold, 2001. 47.

¹⁰ Taylor, A. J. P. *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848-1918*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954. 239-241.

Ottomans would not have the backing of any European powers, as it had in the Crimean War, in its coming war against Russia.

On April 24th, 1877, Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire and moved two armies against it, one to the west of the Black Sea that would cross the Pruth river in Romania and the other to the east of the Black Sea that would move through the Caucasus region, advancing on Kars, Ardahan and Erzurum. The Russian army in Europe swept through Bulgaria, taking all of northern Bulgaria by mid-July. Tsar Alexander himself, at the head of his army, was greeted in Bulgaria as a liberator. Lord Kinross describes Tsar Alexander's campaign in *The Ottoman Centuries*:

From their headquarters at Tirnovo the adventurous Russian general led a flying detachment across the Balkan range into the Thracian plain beyond, thence turned back toward the main Shipka Pass through the mountains, where he defeated a defensive Turkish force. His troops, joined by the Bulgarian Christians, then carried out raids against the Turks in the Maritza Valley, constituting a threat to Adrianople and causing some alarm in Istanbul itself.¹¹

By June, it had looked as if Russia would drive the Turks completely out of Europe and could have potentially marched on Constantinople. Abdul Hamid II was able to reverse this trend with the belated appointments of two generals, Mehmed Ali, who was the Prussian-born governor of Crete and Osman Pasha, a hardened veteran of the Crimean War. Mehmed Ali became the Ottoman commander in Europe and was successful in defeating the Russians and their Bulgarian allies, forcing the Russians to give up much ground in the Balkans. It was Osman Pasha's role in the war though that would give the Ottomans the most political gains:

¹¹ Kinross, Patrick Balfour. *The Ottoman Centuries: The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Empire*. New York: W. Morrow, 1977. 520.

He dug in his forces before and around Plevna, a town among vineyards in a deep rocky valley some twenty miles south of Nicopolis. Here, in a place hitherto defended only by the surrounding ramparts of nature, he swiftly created, with the aid of skilled engineers, a strong military fortress, raising earthworks with redoubts, digging trenches, and quarrying out gun emplacements. Thus from Plevna, his army soon dominated the main strategic routes into the heart of Bulgaria.¹²

Not only were the Turks at Plevna well-prepared for the Russians through the use of heavy entrenchments but Sultan Abdul-Aziz I had previously acquired modern breech-loading rifles, supplied by the United States. These weapons surpassed the old muzzle-loading rifles of the Russians and because of these advantages, the Russians were routed by the end of the first day of the siege. This gave Osman Pasha six weeks to reinforce the defenses of Plevna even more as the Russians sought troop reinforcements from Prince Charles of Romania. When they both arrived back at Plevna, they ferociously attacked the Turkish defenses from three sides in three days of battle. On the first two days, the Russians and Romanians made ground and even flew their flags over the old Turkish redoubts but on the third day, Turkish forces counter-attacked, taking back the redoubts and Romanian forces withdrew from the battle. At this point, it became apparent to the Russians that Plevna could not be stormed but would have to be taken in a long siege in which the Turkish forces would be starved out.

Though Osman Pasha wanted to leave Plevna while he still could, it was because of the success of these battles that Abdul Hamid II requested that Osman hold onto Plevna as long as possible. Osman's successes had led to a massive turn in public opinion of the west, changing the "current barbarous image of Turk to glorify him as a brave fighter of the bulldog breed, and turning back the

¹² *Ibid.*, 521.

scales of public opinion in favour of the Ottoman Empire."¹³ Abdul Hamid promised large numbers of re-enforcements and supplies. Eventually, once the Russians were able to encircle Plevna completely, the supplies stopped coming in. Abdul Hamid's re-enforcements were most likely not what Osman was hoping for as they were quickly routed from Plevna. With supplies and food diminishing in the Balkan winter, Turkish troops scrounged for dogs, cats and mice to eat while no such hardships fell on the Russians sieging the city from the outside.

Realizing there was little hope of lasting through the siege, Osman Pasha attempted to lead his troops to escape westward from the city in the middle of the night. The Turkish troops laid down bridges over the river Vid and fought the surprised Russian forces in organized formation. They fought with the Russians in hand to hand battle with bayonets, neither side advancing. When Osman Pasha was hit in the leg with a stray bullet and his horse was shot dead from under him, Osman's troops fled, in belief that they were left leaderless. The Russians quickly took advantage of the misunderstanding and were able to occupy the redoubts within the city.

After five months of sieging the city, Tsar Alexander II marched into Plevna and Osman Pasha signed the terms of surrender. Though Osman was treated honorably, many of his troops who were severely wounded were left in the camp hospitals to be slaughtered by the Bulgarians who had no mercy on them. With the surrender of Plevna on December 10th, one hundred thousand Russian troops were now freed up to engage in other battles:

One army marched over the Balkan range to capture Sofia;
another forced the surrender of a large Turkish army in the Shipka
Pass to enter Adrianople and thus directly to threaten Istanbul.
Serbia declared war once again, to capture Nish. The

¹³ *Ibid.*

Montenegrins achieved conquests in Herzegovina. Slavonic armies were victorious in all parts of the Balkans. The Greeks threatened war and supported insurrections in the Empire's Greek-inhabited provinces, Crete included. In Asia, the Russians had captured the fortress of Kars from the Turks, for the third time in its history, together with those of Ardahan and Erzurum, thus occupying the bulk of eastern Armenia.¹⁴

Under the Grand Duke Nicholas, the Russian army moved from Adrianople towards Istanbul with a wave of refugees, frostbitten and starving, rushing ahead of them and pouring into the Turkish capitol through the snowy terrain. Grand Duke Nicholas had marched his army all the way to the village of San Stefano which laid on the shores of the Sea of Marmara, a mere ten miles from Istanbul. Not only were the Turks concerned about the imminent invasion of the Russians into Istanbul (Abdul Hamid had pleaded with Queen Victoria to intervene for the result of an armistice) but many of those in the government in London were also concerned. Though the British Cabinet was divided between a war party and a peace party, Disraeli was able to achieve the ordering of five warships to move into the Sea of Marmara under the mission of protecting British lives and property. With British troops ready to face the Russians and its populace ready to defend the Turks that they scorned for their atrocities a little more than a year ago, Russia replied with restraint and the Tsar gave assurance to the Sultan that he had no intention of occupying Istanbul.

On March 3rd, 1878, the bi-lateral treaty of San Stefano was signed by the Russian and Ottoman Empires. This treaty was essentially an attempt by Russia to dismantle the European provinces of the Ottoman Empire. It envisioned the creation of two large Slavic states and heavily favored the Balkans' Slavic populations while disregarding its other populations, both Christian and Muslim. Disraeli opposed it and stated that any treaty be submitted to the

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 522.

scrutiny of Europe. Though Tsar Alexander agreed, he contended that he would choose which articles would be open to scrutiny. Britain disagreed, stating all of the treaty would be open to discussion. When Russia disagreed, Disraeli ordered an Indian force to be moved from the Suez Canal to Malta as a show of force. Simultaneously, Austria-Hungary had mobilized its own forces in protection of its territorial interest in the Balkans. With Britain declaring that it would protect the Greek populations from being absorbed into a Slavic state and Albania creating a league that was ready to "resist until death"¹⁵ any attempt to take its lands, Russia agreed to a European congress in the summer of 1878 with Otto Von Bismarck as its president.

The Congress of Berlin, lasting one month from June 13th to July 13th, ended with the signing of the Treaty of Berlin by the six European powers, Russia, Great Britain, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy, along with the Ottoman Empire. Under the Treaty of Berlin, the Russian state of "Greater Bulgaria" that Russia intended to create in the Treaty of San Stefano would not become a reality, as that was the exact fear of both Great Britain and Austria-Hungary. The region of Bulgaria would be split though into two parts, an independent, northern Bulgarian Kingdom and a southern Bulgarian region called Eastern Rumelia, a region under the Ottoman Empire which would be a *de facto* autonomous state. Both of these would be joined together in 1885. Many of the smaller states within the Balkans gained lands, including Serbia, Montenegro and Greece. Russia would gain part of northeast Anatolia that it conquered in the war and southern Bessarabia in the Balkans.¹⁶

The Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 and the Treaty of Berlin had several major effects. In the short term, Austria-Hungary had expanded its influence in

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 525.

¹⁶ McCarthy, Justin. *The Ottoman Peoples and the End of Empire*. London: Arnold, 2001. 47.

the western Balkans and furthered the anti-Russian interests of Germany by doing so. With the European powers intervening, the Ottoman Empire had been allowed to exist for another forty years. The interests of the Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman Empires would be for nothing when all three of these empires would collapse amidst the chaos of World War I. The longer term effects of all of this would be that the nationalist groups that had arisen from the war and the resulting splitting of the region into various states, without fully taking into consideration all the various nationalist interests, would ultimately lead to the full climax of Balkan nationalism as the volatile powder keg resulting in the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 as well as the Balkan Crisis of 1914 leading to World War I. In effect, it could be considered that the results of World War I are the results of the last Russo-Turkish War but with recent events between Russia and Turkey in Syria, the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 is simply a microcosm of a bigger picture of tense relations between Russians and Turks going back from Ivan the Terrible to Vladimir Putin.