

THE EASTERN QUESTION

From the 1820s onward, the steady collapse of the Ottoman state presented the nations of Europe with a geopolitical challenge that became known as the Eastern Question. Although the Turks had been enemies of the European powers since the late 1300s, the Ottoman Empire was now seen as a satisfactory government to have in place in the Middle East. It was no longer a real threat, it was predictable, and, for the time being, it held together under one regime many volatile parts of Asia and Europe. To destroy it or allow it to fall apart quickly might cause chaos or give birth to a new state that was strong and hostile.

Another aspect of the Eastern Question was that the nations of Europe did not wholly trust each other. The Ottoman Empire sat at a geographically crucial juncture: the crossroads of Europe and Asia, the joining of the Black and Mediterranean seas, and the Suez isthmus, which linked the Mediterranean with the Indian Ocean and Asia. If one European country were to take too much advantage of the Ottomans and seize too much territory from it at one time, it would upset Europe's fragile balance of power. Informally, the nations of Europe agreed to solve this part of the Eastern Question by not acting too suddenly or decisively in the Middle East or the Mediterranean. The Ottomans' decline was to be managed carefully and slowly. If necessary, the European powers would prop the empire up if it seemed in danger of immediate collapse. This, at least, was the theory. As things turned out, Britain and France, nervous about Austrian and Russian ambitions in the Balkans and Mediterranean, tended to safeguard the Turks against the east European empires. Of course, this strategy did not stop the British and French from taking what they wanted from the Ottomans.

The complicated nature of the Eastern Question was illustrated many times. It took so long for the Europeans to decide to aid Greece during the 1820s because they were afraid of causing too much damage to the Ottoman Empire at once. Shortly after helping the Greeks against the Turks, Britain and France assisted the Turks in settling the revolt of Muhammad Ali in Egypt. The European powers feared that Muhammad Ali would be too formidable an enemy if he toppled the Ottoman sultan. The dangers of competing over the spoils of Ottoman decay were also made clear on several occasions. The Crimean War, the first major conflict among the European powers since the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, was touched off in 1853 when Tsar Nicholas I of Russia invaded the Danubian principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia, which were part of the Ottomans' European territory. In 1854, France and Britain joined the Turks in fighting Russia. The allies attacked Russia's Black Sea naval headquarters at Sevastopol, on the Crimean peninsula, and after a costly struggle that killed at least 250,000 troops, the French, British, and Turks defeated Russia by 1856.

The tensions surrounding the Eastern Question worsened after 1870. The construction of the Suez Canal in 1869 increased the geographical importance of Egypt and North Africa, as well as France's and Britain's interest in the region (discussed subsequently). The unification of Italy in the 1860s added another European power that had ambitions in the eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, Balkan nationalism was making it harder for the Turks to hold on to their European possessions. For example, Serbia gained autonomy in 1867 and thirsted for complete freedom, as well as more land. Montenegro, Romania, and Bulgaria also wanted greater autonomy from Turkish control.

Answer the following questions in your notebook:

1. Why was the possible collapse of the Ottoman Empire a problem for European nations?
2. Identify examples of European response to the possibility of the Ottoman Empire collapsing?