The Crimean War: General Causes

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…. Britain felt that it was essential to keep control over the Mediterranean sea routes and to preserve the Ottoman Empire as a barrier against Russian expansionist tendencies. These considerations led to hostility against Russia. Britain also had the idea, advocated by Richard Cobden, that free trade would lead to world peace. The repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 had begun to turn Britain into a free trade nation; by encouraging other nations to turn to free trade, Britain was attempting to increase her own wealth. It has also been said that the British thought that they had the 'secret of civilisation' and wanted to export her political system to the remainder of the world.

However, over this period of time, the Sultans who ruled the Ottoman Empire had learned to make strengths out of their weaknesses. The Turkish Empire was much weaker following the loss of territory to the Russians and from the creation of independent nations such as Greece. Sultan Abd al-Majid was relying heavily on foreign aid to help him to hold the remainder of his empire together. He had allowed the empire to weaken because history had shown that he could always get help. Europe reaped the rewards of supporting the Sultan.

Russia found the Ottoman Empire attractive and vulnerable especially as a means of acquiring access to the Straits — the Bosphorus, Sea of Marmara and the Dardanelles — to allow an easy passage into the Mediterranean. Britain had every intention of ensuring that Russia was kept out of the Mediterranean, and the Sultan knew it: he continued to play off one Power against another. Russia had shown that she was always going to take any opportunity to probe into Turkish territory; Britain's policy was that the Russians needed firm handling because they could be prevented from invading Turkey and it was thought that the Russians were not prepared to go to war over Turkish territory. It was an intractable problem.

The 1848 Revolutions had changed Europe. The standards of diplomacy which had held firm since 1815 had gone and new approaches in foreign matters were coming into use. …Metternich had been forced to flee from Vienna … Napoleon III was Emperor of France and was seeking personal prestige. New men had assumed office in most European nations and they were not dealing with old problems in the same way as their predecessors.

By 1850, Britain's sensitivity to the Eastern Question had increased because India was the most important part of the Empire — a real asset and the 'jewel in the Crown' — as a result of free trade and overseas expansion. India was a source of raw materials and Britain feared the threat to the overland route to India. Railways had expanded the British economy. To some extent, a century of British foreign policy was now coming to fruition. Britain was becoming a victim of her own policy of maintaining the integrity of the Turkish Empire.

The position of Napoleon III as Emperor of the French was crucial. He had great ambitions as well as the misfortune and liability of his name - Bonaparte. The French wanted prestige and expansionism to uphold the name "Second Empire", and expected to get it from a Bonaparte. Also, Napoleon III wanted to keep Papal support and therefore needed to uphold the Catholic Church wherever he could. Napoleon III was arrogant and ambitious; he was looking for sources of pride and achievement.

The state of British politics did not help. In 1852 Palmerston was appointed as Home Secretary in Aberdeen's government; Aberdeen hated war, and disliked Palmerston. It was a coalition government riven with instability and indecision. In the 1840s Aberdeen gave Czar Nicholas I the strong impression that Britain would not go to war over Turkey, which made it likely that Russia would probe harder and further. Radicals like John Arthur Roebuck, the MP for Sheffield, supported the war because it proved their point that further reform of parliament and other outmoded institutions — such as the War Office and the Army — were needed desperately.

Russian ambitions to expand into the Mediterranean increased in ratio to the decline of Turkey. The Czar still wanted to make territorial gains in the Ottoman Empire, despite being thwarted several times already. To add to the problems, relations between Czar Nicholas I and Napoleon III were poor because:
Napoleon I had invaded Russia in 1812 and caused untold hardship there. The mere name 'Napoleon' was unpopular in Russia.

Napoleon III had come to power through a coup d'état: he was a usurper and a product of revolution, not a legitimate ruler. The Czar saw him as being no better than the Liberal Nationalists who had caused such troubles in Europe in 1848.

On Napoleon III's accession, Czar Nicholas I sent him a telegram that began, "Monsieur mon ami," instead of the traditional and customary "Monsieur mon frère". It was an insult to Napoleon III and also was a diplomatic snub; Napoleon wanted revenge.

The situation in Europe in 1850 was different from any previous situation after the end of the French Wars, since the capacity for co-operation between Britain, France and Russia did not exist in 1850: it was unlikely that the three countries could negotiate because

- British relations with Austria were strained after the Kossuth and Haynau incidents following the 1848 Revolutions
- British relations with Russia and France were strained after the Don Pacifico incident of 1850 [When an anti-Semitic mob attacked a British subject, Don Pacifico, in Athens, Britain sent a naval blockade of Greece which angered France.]
- Russo-French relations were strained for many reasons, including the attitude of the Czar towards Napoleon III

Consequently, prospects did not look good. The change of personnel involved was important in the build-up to war:

- Napoleon III in France was looking for glory
- Lord John Russell [a Whig leader], who was weak, was British Foreign Secretary
- This was a time when strained international relations being dealt with by new men
- Many of the British Cabinet tended towards pacifism — but even Gladstone — who in no way was a war-monger, because wars cost money — deemed the Crimean War to be 'justifiable'.

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The Crimean War: immediate causes

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Although the long term causes of the Crimean War probably were more crucial, the immediate causes of the war — ostensibly, at least — were over religion, particularly over the protectorship of the Holy Places in Jerusalem…. The Eastern Orthodox Church and Roman Catholic Church … could not work/together. Both of them wanted to control the Holy Places.

….Between 1740 and 1820 the influence of the Roman Catholic Church had been allowed to lapse by natural erosion: there were not many Roman Catholics in that part of the world and Christians tended to belong to the Eastern Orthodox Church. Consequently, protection of the Holy Places had gradually devolved to Orthodox monks. Russia represented the Orthodox Church as its protector and Czar Nicholas I seems to have thought that he had been ordained by God as the leader of the Orthodox Church and the protector of Orthodox Christians. By the 1840s, Russian pilgrims were flocking to the Holy Land, which gave the Czar the excuse to demand that the Russians should be able to provide some form of protection for his subjects there.

In 1850, Louis Napoleon of France decided to champion the cause of Roman Catholics to control the Holy Places; technically he was within his rights but his demands on behalf of the Church allowed him to divert attention from problems in France and also helped him to advocate the idea of a second French Empire. In order to win the support of the majority of the French, Louis Napoleon needed to be seen as a 'good Catholic'…. 
....The Turks disliked the Russo-French conflict that was taking place on Turkish territory and the Sultan established a commission to examine the claims of the French. France suggested that the Catholic and Orthodox Churches should have joint control over the Holy Places: this led to an uproar in Russia and then deadlock. ...[B]y the end of 1852 the French had seized control of the Holy Places. This was seen by the Russians as a challenge to their prestige and policy; the Czar also saw Turkey falling under 'foreign' control. Nicholas I wanted Russia to have control over the Near East with the agreement of the western powers, especially Britain, so that Russian expansion could take place peacefully. ....

.... The Czar felt shamed by the lack of success [at Britain negotiating an peaceful conclusion to the disagreements], therefore he decided to find out firstly, how strong the Sultan was and then how strong was Britain's intention to resist Russian encroachment....

In 1853, Russia invaded Turkish Moldavia and Wallachia which were autonomous areas within the Ottoman Empire. Nicholas' aim was not territorial conquest or to provoke a war but rather to bully and test Turkey, to see what the response would be and to force the Sultan to give guarantees to the Orthodox Church that Christians would be protected from harm. Czar Nicholas I did not expect either a hostile response from Britain or Anglo-French co-operation, given that the two countries were seen as 'natural' enemies. The result of Nicholas' actions were far from what he expected and his gamble did not pay off because he actually put pressure on the European peace.

- France — as personified by Louis Napoleon, now the Emperor Napoleon III — became aggressive and noisy.
- Britain was alarmed because of the threat to Turkey from the perceived Russian expansionist activity. There was therefore much activity with Britain's Mediterranean fleet.
- Austria feared invasion because Russia had crossed the Danube, which was Austria's outlet to the Black Sea. Austria therefore began to mobilize.
- When Austria began to mobilize, so Prussia started a partial mobilization, fearing a threat to the Germanic Confederation.

[The Powers] called a Conference of Vienna in 1853. It was attended by Russia, Austria, Prussia, Turkey, Britain and France, to hammer out a compromise to defuse the situation. They produced the Vienna Note, an official diplomatic document of mediation proposing a compromise which Russia was prepared to accept because she did not want war. It said that the Czar should evacuate Moldavia and Wallachia but that Russia, as the protector of the Orthodox Church, should have nominal protection of Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire and of the Holy Places. The Note confirmed the status quo: neither Russia nor France got anything, but face was saved. ....[P]reviously the Powers had backed up their decisions with joint military support. This was the watershed of the crisis which could have ended at this point, but things went wrong and resulted in the Crimean War. There was no joint military force set up to follow the Note and there was no emphatic diplomacy to make the Sultan accept the Note ...

There was a positive response to the Vienna Note from the Russians who agreed to it and began to evacuate Moldavia and Wallachia. This proves that Russia was just probing into the Ottoman Empire and did not want war. She had been given nominal protection of the Holy Places and was appeased, if not satisfied. Russia would always make a diplomatic retreat if faced with strong opposition. Unfortunately, in October 1853 the Sultan rejected the Note and declared war on Russia because Stratford [the British ambassador] had assured the Sultan of British backing and also because Turkish territory had been invaded. The Sultan wanted revenge and he thought that he was assured of British backing. In the past, the Powers had used conjoint force to enforce their views on the Sultan but this time there was no military back-up for their decision. The Powers thought that the Note was enough and they were unable to co-operate among themselves for a variety of reasons:

- Austria did not want to get involved in disputes with any of the major Powers and so chose to remain neutral in this instance. She was more concerned with Prussian expansion and the Italian revolts. She feared losing her Italian lands
- Austria and Prussia were mutually suspicious, and Prussia was expanding
Russia was opposed by Britain and France
Britain (under Aberdeen) was indecisive
Russia was disappointed with Austria's attitude, after Russian help in suppressing the Hungarian revolt in 1848.

In November 1853 the Russian Black Sea fleet based at Sevastopol and the Turkish fleet met at the Battle of Sinope. The Turkish fleet was sunk. It was a provocative action by Russia because she had no real reason to fear Turkey. The affair was reported in the British press as the 'Massacre of Sinope', and caused fever-pitch anti-Russian feeling among the public. It also strengthened the 'war faction' in the Cabinet, for unexplained and obscure reasons. Perhaps a combination of reasons were responsible: it has been argued that

- perhaps the long peace — since 1815 — had created a desire for war. It provoked patriotism and expressed the British cock-sure attitude which resulted from her economic, territorial and free trade strength
- Sinope was a naval victory: Russia clearly had a Black Sea fleet which needed to be defeated before it got into the Mediterranean. The British felt that the Russian naval threat could not be allowed to grow
- Britain was becoming more and more dependent on trade, especially with India and the east: Sinope followed the Great Exhibition of 1851 that had demonstrated Britain's industrial pre-eminence in the world. The Mediterranean trade and the routes to India could not be jeopardised
- In Britain, the 'war party' had been growing since the summer of 1853.

Even moderate papers like The Times demanded retribution before Russia over-ran Turkey: Russia could do this legitimately, since Turkey was the country that had declared war on Russia. Demands were made for a British fleet to be sent to the Straits, but the Cabinet was divided between 'war' and 'peace' factions, resulting in indecision... By Christmas 1853, the British government was left with little choice….

From the Vienna Note onwards, it is difficult to see how war could have been avoided… stronger action taken earlier might have stopped Russia. There was some element of Russia calling Britain's bluff, following the Czar's informal talks with Aberdeen [British foreign minister] in 1844, when Aberdeen's low-profile approach had intimated to the Czar that Britain would never go to war over Turkey. There is much evidence to suggest that Czar Nicholas I was under the illusion that British foreign policy towards Turkey had changed: even that Britain might consider the partition of Turkey, to end the problem; certainly he believed that Britain would not fight over the issue. The long gap of four months before Britain did declare war strengthened Russia's misapprehension. They had expected Britain to rush in, if she was going to do anything. It was a shock for the Czar to discover that British policy towards the Ottoman Empire had not changed.

Who was responsible for the Crimean War?

The Sultan? Had he been encouraged to act like this by past events? Stratford Stratford had said that Britain would help, so the Sultan declared war on Russia because he knew the Allies would come to his rescue.

Russia? They had always looked to expand into Turkey but withdrew if strongly opposed.

Britain? Aberdeen's apparent change of policy might have encouraged Russia.

France? Napoleon III was looking for prestige.

Austria? She could have resisted Russia and joined the Allies.

Every nation's position is understandable, although similar scenarios had been defused earlier. There was actually more reason for a war in 1839 than in 1854.

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