

# The Crimean War:

1853–1856

## Diplomatic Prelude

As he had on other occasions, Nicholas I tried again in 1853 to get an understanding with England about the position of Turkey and to prevent a rapprochement between England and France. The Russians would not tolerate the establishment of the English in Constantinople, but did not want to annex the city either. Temporary occupation by Russia might, however, be necessary to secure Russia's aim of finally getting secure outlet from the Black Sea. In discussions with Foreign Minister Russell of Britain Russia suggested an independent Moldavia and Wallachia, a Serbia under Russian protection, and an independent Bulgaria. The English were to get Egypt and Crete. The Austrians could establish themselves on the Adriatic.

Russell rejected the "offer" and said that France would have to be consulted on the matter. Nicholas I, however, was under the erroneous impression that some sort of "new system" existed as a result of Nesselrode's Memorandum of 1844, which had suggested a arrangement with regard to the Straits. This particular memorandum and the substance of the current diplomatic conversations with British Ambassador Seymour in St. Petersburg were published by Britain and touted as proof that "dark ambitions of a foreign despot" were endangering the peace of Europe.

## Immediate Cause

The Franco–Russian dispute over the holy places in Palestine was the immediate cause of the Crimean War. At the time Turkey controlled Palestine, Egypt, and large chunks of the Middle East. The Port (Moslem ruler of Turkey) had given privileges to protect the Christians and their churches in the Holy Land to many nations. That explains why so many different churches and nationals control various holy shrines in Israel to this very day. At the time France and England had gotten more specific commitments from the Port than other nations.

France's interest in Palestine had been stimulated by a domestic crisis in 1840–1841. Napoleon II pushed it because he relied on the support of militant clerical groups in France. In 1850 Napoleon III requested the restoration to French Catholics of the capitulations of 1740. This meant that the French wanted the key to the Church of the Nativity in the old city of Jerusalem and the right to place a silver star on Christ's birthplace in Bethlehem. The French threatened military action if the Porte did not give way and the Russians threatened to occupy Moldavia and Wallachia if he did. The weak Porte did the best he could under the circumstances and gave a yes answer to foreign parties. This bit of typical Turkish duplicity was soon discovered. When it was discovered the French send the warship Charlemagne to Constantinople and a squadron of ship the Bay of Tripoli. In December 1852, having no other choice, the Porte gave in to Paris.

In February Nicholas responded by mobilizing two army corps and sending his ambassador,

Menshikov, to Constantinople. Menshikov demanded not only the restoration of Greek rights but also a secret alliance and the protection of all orthodox laymen under Turkish rule—that meant some 12 million subject of the Porte. At this point the British got into the act in the person of a very clever diplomatic operator in Constantinople by the name of Stratford de Redcliffe. The latter outfoxed Menshikov who got concessions on the Greek rights issue but none of the other demands. So Meshikov went home.

It seems silly to us today that they argued over the keys to a church, but then it was not just any church. And besides, the religious issue was not the essential factor in the Franco-Russian dispute. France wanted to break down the continental alliance that had paralyzed her for half a century. National interests were involved here. England and France, in particular responded to popular sentiment stirred up by liberal and patriotic groups in their countries. Financial and trading groups, as always, were involved as well. Such pressure is not evident in the case of Russia. The Black Sea trade at this time was still quite insignificant.

When the Menshikov Mission became public knowledge it strengthened the anti-Russian faction in the British cabinet. So the British decided it was worth a war to keep and expand their interest in the Eastern Mediterranean. In June 1853 an Anglo-French naval force entered the Dardanelles. In July the Russian army invaded the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia (modern day Rumania).

The war could still have been prevented. There were 11 different projects for pacification at the end of 1853. But the only important one was the so-called "Vienna Note" to Turkey and Russia by France, Austria, Prussia, and England. The Porte was to promise no change in the status quo without the explicit consent of France and Russia. Russia accepted this condition, but Turkey naturally rejected it. Nicholas I and Francis Joseph of Austria even had a personal summit at Olmütz. Nicholas promised not to intervene in Turkey or to extract some right to protect orthodox Christians under Turkish, like in the famous Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardje. The English, however, turned this deal down.

## The War

Then in October 1853 Turkey took action by declaring war on Russia. The Anglo-French fleet now penetrated further into the straits and anchored in the Bosphorus. In November off the coast of Sinope in the Black Sea, meanwhile, the Turkish fleet was defeated by the Russians. Any settlement after this was impossible. The popular press in England and France became violent. In January 1854 the Anglo-French fleet sailed into the Black Sea. France, England and Turkey then made a formal alliance. When the Russian troops crossed the Danube, the Turkish war merged into a war against the European coalition. This was precisely the turn of events Nicholas had tried so hard to avoid.

In 1855 Piedmont joined the war, largely to be present at the peace conference and thus able to argue for her interest in Italian unification. Prussia remained neutral. Austria, although not belligerent had a definitely anti-Russian policy and came to the brink of war twice. Seeking some advantage in the conflict, Prussia and Austria signed a defensive alliance. Then they joined France and England in a diplomatic demarche demanding the withdrawal of Russia from Moldavia and Wallachia. Russia was soon forced to withdraw from those principalities and Austria then proceeded to occupy Moldavia and Wallachia. This forced Russia to keep an army on the Pruth, however.

Meanwhile, the Vienna Conference, in session throughout the war, formulated a peace proposal:

- European guarantee for a Russian protectorate over Moldavia and Wallachia and Serbia;
- freedom of navigation on the Danube River;
- revision of the Straits Convention of 1841;
- five-power (England, France, Prussia, Austria, and Russia) protection of Christians in Turkey

instead of only by Russia

Russia did not give in to this program until Austria sent an ultimatum and threatened war. Frederick William IV urged Alexander II (since February 1855) to accept.

Lord Palmerston, the new Prime Minister of England (since February 1855) wanted a partial dismemberment of Russia. Napoleon III and Francis Joseph of Austria were not willing to go that far. Nicholas II had been expecting an uprising of Christian subjects of the Porte, or even been willing to promote it, but he was dissuaded from doing so by his minister Nesselrode. The latter argued that it was contrary to the Russian policy of maintaining the Porte.

While the equipment of the Allies was clearly superior to that of the Russian, they could not win the war—or at least there was no quick victory. When the Danubian campaign of Gorchakov turned into a disaster, Palmerston suggested the Crimean expedition—an attempt to hit Russia in the soft underbelly, as Churchill might have said. But strong Russian resistance at the Sevastopol naval base came as a shock to the Allies. What followed was a surprise to the general public but not those in the know. A storm of indignation broke out in France and England over the failures of the military high command. The famous "charge of the Light Brigade" was only the most blatant example of allied military blundering. Russia did better with the Turks and won the battle of Kars, their only victory.

Total Russian losses in the war, including victims of disease, amount to 600,000. This was a loss the government could hardly sustain. Nicholas and his ultra-conservative policies were held to be responsible for the formation of the anti-Russian coalition which defeated them. The personal ambitions and irresponsible adventures of Nicholas, Napoleon, Palmerston, and Stratford also played a role in the disaster of the war. Unwise decisions at the very top were made consistently throughout the war. For Russia it meant that reforms were now unavoidable.

## Treaty of Paris (1856)

The coup de grace was delivered by the Austrian ultimatum, not the fall of Sevastopol. Napoleon offered to help Russia secure "peace with honor," but Palmerston vigorously opposed such a move. Napoleon and Walewski supported Russia as much as they could in the Congress of Paris without intimidating and hurting the Anglo-French alliance.

So Sevastopol was exchanged for Kars. No big deal. A piece of southern Bessarabia was ceded to Moldavia to insure internal navigation of the Danube. The integrity of the Ottoman Porte was once more guaranteed. All promised not to interfere in Turkey. The Straits remained closed to warships. The Black Sea, in fact, was neutralized. Moldavia and Wallachia were put under Turkish suzerainty. The same fate awaited Serbia, with Ottoman troops allowed to garrison the territory. Russia, meanwhile, was forbidden to station troops on the Aland Islands.

Britain, France, and Austria signed a special treaty to defend the Paris settlement by force, if necessary. There is little doubt that the whole affair had a definite anti-Russian flavor. It is no surprise, therefore, that Russia remained hostile to the settlement—and Britain, to some extent as well. In Russia the Paris Treaty gave rise to the chauvinistic Slavophile movement.

Russian Revisions: Major themes:

- to throw off the Black Sea restrictions and regain southern Bessarabia;
- friction with England and France over the disposition of Poland;
- repercussions over Russian expansion in the Far East and Central Asia;

- intensified Russian interest in the Balkans between 1856 and 1878.

Gorchakov, who was Foreign Minister throughout the reign of Alexander II, carried out an elegant diplomacy without substance. From 1856 until 1859 a kind of Franco-Russian friendship existed, although Alexander clearly mistrusted Napoleon III.

Russia and France cooperated in supporting the union of Moldavia and Wallachia (1858–1866), and also on Serbia and Montenegro. Russia, therefore, remained neutral during the Franco-Austrian War of 1859 which began the process of Italian unification. All Russia did was mass troops on the Austrian frontier. The Russian effort to get a diplomatic demarche of the powers with regard to the oppressed Christian subjects of the Porte failed to get French support in 1860. What drew the Eastern powers closer together was the common fear of revolution. France, for instance, continued to support the efforts of the Polish revolutionaries. The Russo-Prussian Convention of 1863 (the so-called Alvensleben Convention) permitted Russian troops to cross into Prussia in pursuit of the Polish rebels. As you might have expected, there was once more a revolution in Poland in 1863 to throw off the Russian yoke.

A quasi-solidarity of European powers developed, but it had no effect on Russia in terms of stopping her from crushing the Poles again. Napoleon III called for a congress, but he could not intervene to help the Poles since he was deeply committed and overextended in his Mexican expedition. Palmerston, typically, refused to intervene on behalf of the Poles. In this situation, Russia was estranged from Europe and France and drew closer to Prussia. This began some thirty years of cooperation between Russia and Prussia.

The succession of the Danish George I in Greece in 1863 came off with reasonable cooperation among Britain, France, and Russia, the protecting powers. The same held true during the crisis of the Crete revolt in 1867–1869, although Russia lost considerable prestige in Athens. Russia objected helplessly to the succession of Charles Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen to the throne of Cuza in Rumania (Moldavia and Wallachia had been united in 1866 to form Rumania).

Russia had pushed hard for a guarantee that Prince Christian of Glücksburg would be the ruler of Schleswig-Holstein-Lauenburg, as part of the Danish crown. This had been settled in the Treaty of London in 1852. The Danish royal charter then annexed Schleswig. Prussia did not like this and sent an ultimatum to the Danes in 1863. The German Confederation (created after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815) sent troops to occupy Holstein. Austria and Prussia sent troops into Schleswig-Holstein-Lauenburg. The Danes were thus forced to cede all three provinces to Austria and Prussia by the virtue of the Gastein Convention in 1865.

But this was merely a stopgap. Bismarck had an alliance with Italy and an understanding with France which would allow for Venice to be ceded to Italy and Schleswig-Holstein to Prussia. So the balance of power changed. Russia facilitated the moves of Bismarck and kept England and France from doing anything. This was, in part, the result of the Alvensleben Convention. Russia only half-heartedly opposed the annexation of Schleswig-Holstein, despite the fact that she was pledged to uphold the 1852 agreement on Glücksburg. Russia in general favored Prussia with some misgivings but with an eye on the revision of the Paris Treaty. Foreign Minister Beust of Austria was pro-French and helped Russia draw closer to Berlin. King William and Alexander met at Bad Ems in 1870 to reach an accord on the Danish matter. Russia even promised to neutralize any move by Austria. Russia, Britain, Italy, and Austria in fact signed a pact to inform each other in case any of them decided to deviate from the general policy of neutrality.

The close understanding Russia had with Prussia led Gorchakov in 1870 to renounce the Black Sea neutrality clause of the Paris Treaty on grounds that the treaty had been violated with the unification

of Rumania and was against the security of Russia. The objections of the European powers at this point was mostly because of his procedure, not the fact of it. The British did push for a conference, which was held in London, but did no more than stamp approval on a fait accompli. Russophobia, however, soon rose again in the West and Russia, for that matter, did very little to put a navy in the Black Sea.

When Count Andrassy replaced the Russophobic Beust, Austria became willing to cooperate with Russia in maintaining the Ottoman Porte. Russia for the first time was now willing to renounce her claim to the exclusive protection of Balkan Christians. The rulers of Russia, Austria, and the newly-formed German Empire, exchanged visits in 1873 and formed the so-called Three Emperors League. Russia and Germany promised military assistance to each other if they are attacked. Austria and Russia did the same at Schönbrunn. So, we have here a revival of the old Holy Alliance to preserve the status quo. The terms of the entente were vague and led to severe strains in 1875 when Gorchakov (hostile to Bismarck) backed France and claimed to have prevented a new Franco-Prussian war.

## Note on Alaska

It was during this time that Russia sold Alaska to the United States for some 7.2 million dollars. That is less than a good warplane costs today! Why did they do it?

Well--Russia was eager to complicate American relations with England, her foe in the Crimean War. England was suspected of favoring the Confederacy in the American Civil War. The U.S. refused to take part in the European demarche with regard to Poland in 1863, so she was persona grata in Russia. In fact the Russians sent one of her fleets to the United States in 1863 for fear that a war in Europe would destroy the fleet. Besides, the Russian-America Company in Alaska was never very prosperous and the furs she got from Alaska were of inferior quality. The Russians thought that the British attack in Crimea meant that would also attack Alaska. So the Russian-America Company was transferred to the American flag for a while.

Discussion of the proposed sale began in 1854. Bribery was liberally used by the Russian ambassador (Stoeckl) in Washington to sway politicians in favor of a buy. There was still a chance that the American fleet could have gone to the Mediterranean to balance British power in that region. The Russians, of course, were trying to prevent that eventuality. It is amazing today, but at the time there was much criticism of this 7.2 million-dollar deal in both countries. In America they called it "Seward's folly!"

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