

THE EASTERN QUESTION AND THE RUSSIAN SOCIETY IN THE LATE 1850S - EARLY 1870S

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Abstract

In the late 1850s - early 1870s, the Eastern question was still relevant to the Russian society. Meanwhile, events related to the Crimean War, a need to overcome consequences of the defeat and carry out domestic reforms led to a decrease in the importance of the Eastern problem from the point of view of Russian public interest compared to a previous period. However, with the strengthening of Russia's internal and external position in the mid-sixties, public interest in the Eastern question revived. Foreign policy issues drew special attention of conservatives and Slavophiles.

Keywords: The Eastern question; the Balkans; the Black Sea Straits; the Russian society; conservatives; Slavophiles.

At the time being, disputes within Russian public circles have taken form of discussions about new priorities in terms of solving a central aspect of the Eastern question – augmentation of Russian influence in the Balkans and the Black Sea Straits. It should be noted that a public vision of the priorities in this issue did not remain unchanged. One part of the society believed that the problem of the Balkans was only a means for solving the key problem of the Straits. Others believed that a resolution of the Straits issue was inseparable from the incorporation of the Balkan region in one form or another into the sphere of Russia's political and spiritual influence. Still the third denied the need to put the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles under Russia's control, insisting on strengthening the indirect (economic and cultural) influence of Russia in the Balkan region.

Despite the fact that the views of representatives of the above-mentioned groups were not always opposite to each other, they belonged to different social trends. Thus, the purpose of this article is to elucidate ideas about the Eastern question, ways to solve it and interests of Russia from the point of view of the main socio-political trends: conservative, Slavophil and liberal.

After the defeat in the Crimean War, Russia faced the problem of forming a new foreign policy concept. It was briefly formulated by Alexander Gorchakov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia, in two circular dispatches sent to Russian embassies and missions abroad. It suggested a rejection of the "inheritance" of the Holy Alliance and a revision of the attitude towards Austria, which had pursued a policy hostile to Russia during the Crimean War of 1853-1856.¹

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¹ *Восточный вопрос во внешней политике России в конце XVIII – начале XX века*, Москва: Наука, Главное издательство восточной литературы 1978, с. 153.

It was proclaimed that the main attention was to be paid to internal problems, and foreign policy was to be subordinated to the solution of these problems.

On the international arena, Russia had to be cautious, healing wounds and gathering strengths. Gorchakov's famous phrase from the circular of 2 September 1856² proclaimed: "Russia is blamed for self-isolation and keeping silence. It is said that Russia is exasperated. Russia is not exasperated. Russia is concentrating."³

The tendency to pursue a policy of the status quo (with the exception of territorial advancement in the North Caucasus, Central Asia and the Far East) prevailed in the government circles of Russia until the mid-1870s. Gorchakov, in his report to Emperor Alexander II in 1865, still insisted on the necessity to subordinate foreign policy to the tasks of internal development.⁴

In the eastern direction, the Russian government and society agreed that the immediate goal of Russian diplomacy was the elimination of the consequences of defeat in the Crimean war. According to the Treaty of Paris and the Russian-Turkish Convention of 30 March 1856, the Black Sea was declared open "for commercial navigation of all nations", and therefore Russia and Turkey were forbidden to have fleets and naval arsenals in the Black Sea basin.⁵

Thus, Russia was in a worse position than the Ottoman Empire, which retained the right to have naval forces in the Marmara Sea, near Constantinople (Istanbul). The convention on the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles attached to the Treaty of Paris, was directed against Russia. It banned a presence of all warships in the Black Sea only for a time when the Ottoman Empire was in a state of peace. It meant that in the event of a war between Russia and the Ottoman Empire an enemy's fleet could pass through the Straits and threaten the unprotected Black Sea coast of Russia.

As a result, despite the fact that liberalization of the Black Sea had greatly contributed to Russia's success in trade and postal communication in the region, the Black Sea security problem remained crucial in Russia's foreign policy.⁶

At that time this problem caused a lively response of the Russian society. In a short period of time, from 1858 to 1860, Peter Chikhachev, a responsible officer of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a well-known Russian geographer, traveler and publicist, published three articles in which he analyzed the prospects of the Treaty of Paris, its implications for Russia and the great powers of Europe, as well as the fate of the Eastern question and the Ottoman Empire. Assessing the outcome of the Paris Congress (1856), the Russian scientist pointed out that the concessions made by Russia to the great powers were temporary. The

² All dates are given according to the Gregorian calendar.

³ *Россия и Черноморские проливы (XVIII-XX столетия)*, Москва: Международные отношения 1999, с. 169.

⁴ *Восточный вопрос во внешней политике России в конце XVIII – начале XX века*, с. 153.

⁵ *Сборник договоров России с другими государствами, 1856-1917*, Москва: Издательство политической литературы 1952, с. 26, 28.

⁶ С. Ф. Орешкова, Н. Ю. Ульченко, *Россия, Турция и проблема формирования границ*, Москва: Гуманитарий 2006, с. 77-78.

analysis of the international situation and the geopolitical position of Russia pushed Chikhachev to a conclusion about the inevitable restoration of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. Noting that concessions made by Russia to Europe were not a national catastrophe, he nevertheless stressed that from the point of view of security and political status those concessions were offensive to Russia:

It is therefore impossible that it (Russia – A. B.) agreed to recognize this position other than as a temporary settlement. Russia reserves the right to abandon it immediately, as soon as the political situation in Europe presents a suitable chance.⁷

Turning to the immediate tasks of Russia for the next period, Chikhachev stressed that an active policy in the Eastern question was impossible, and a pause had to be taken for carrying out internal reforms. According to Chikhachev, the defeat in the Crimean War was even a boon for Russia, since it allowed the Russian government to concentrate on carrying out necessary reforms: “The policy of further conquests has become meaningless for Russia. We accepted the defeat and the Treaty of Paris with relief.”⁸

Thus, after the defeat in the war, the prevailing view among a significant part of the Russian society (predominantly liberal) was the rejection of Russia's active policy in the traditional Balkan-Near East direction. This was due to both the natural result of the defeat, and to the certainty that Russia had reached a maximum level of territorial expansion. The policy of expansion seemed not only unnecessary, but, as the experience of the Crimean War showed, even dangerous, since Russia had remained alone, provoking creation of a hostile coalition of the European great powers against itself.⁹

At the same time, the authorities and the society were in solidarity regarding the need to abolish the restrictive articles of the Treaty of Paris, which belittled not only the great-power dignity of Russia, but also created a potential threat to its national security. The same unanimity of views could be seen in understanding of the need for a peaceful respite. In general, after the Crimean War, the priority of national interests in foreign policy was realized by everybody in Russia.

At the same time, the fragility of the Paris Peace was also recognized by Russian intellectuals because of its unfair nature and the contradictions within the Crimean coalition of powers that were guarantors of the observance of the Paris Treaty. Chikhachev believed that the main reason for the fragility of the Paris system was the existence of the Ottoman Empire, whose artificial nature, in his opinion, only prolonged its agony, but did not solve any of the problems accumulated in this state. Having made another trip to Asia Minor in July–October 1858, he came to the conclusion that Turkey was completely incapable of modernizing its state structure.¹⁰ The Porte failed to implement

⁷ П. А. Чихачев, *Великие державы и Восточный вопрос*, Москва: Наука 1970, с. 70.

⁸ Там же, с. 178.

⁹ Там же, с. 184.

¹⁰ Там же, с. 113-131.

reforms which had been proclaimed by the Sultan's decree of 18 February 1856 (*Hatt-i-Humayun*). This program of reforms was one of the conditions for the adoption of the Ottoman Empire into the concert of the European great powers at the Paris Congress.¹¹

According to Chikhachev, the very principle of the existence of the Ottoman state, based on the domination of the Muslim population and centuries-old traditions, made impossible any drastic reforms aimed at alleviating the situation for the Christian population of the Ottoman Empire. All this, according to the scientist, was:

A natural consequence of the age-old system, invariably preserved in a thousand-different species. You cannot touch any part of this chain without breaking it all, shake at least one column without destroying the whole building.¹²

In these conditions, continued Chikhachev, the further existence of Turkey would depend mainly on external factors, namely on the degree of readiness of the great powers to begin its partition:

The great powers, relying on the right of the strongest, consider themselves legitimate heirs of Turkey ... Therefore, since there is a question of a hopeless patient (Ottoman Empire – *A. B.*), each of the five great powers is primarily concerned with the shares that rivals can get, and while it seems that a neighbor will get more, they could not and still cannot agree.¹³

Thus, the idea of European equilibrium prevailing in the European diplomacy was, according to Chikhachev, the main factor prolonging the existence of the "despotic" Ottoman state. From his point of view, such a policy only postponed the solution of the Eastern question, but it could not ensure a long-lasting peace in Europe and the Near East. All this forced the Russian government and society to work for the most acceptable solution of the Eastern question for Russia.

The weakening of Russia in the Crimean War made adjustments to its foreign policy line in the Balkans. The strengthening of the national liberation movement of the Balkan peoples and the possible prospect of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire did not correspond with the interests of Russia in those circumstances. As it was mentioned above, this point of view, widespread in the second half of the 1850s and 1860s, was repeatedly expressed by Gorchakov. In this regard, the Russian government planned to stabilize Russian positions in the Near East through bilateral relations with the Ottoman Empire and improvement of the Russian-French relations, using a rivalry between France and Austria in Northern Italy. At the same time, Russia was not going to give up patronage over the Slavic population of the Balkans. In his report for 1861

¹¹ *Сборник договоров России с другими государствами*, с. 25.

¹² П. А. Чихачев, *Великие державы и Восточный вопрос*, с. 125.

¹³ Там же, р. 174.

to Alexander II, Gorchakov stressed that “the Slavic element in the East is the most solid base of our influence there”.¹⁴

Petersburg was going to restore its influence in the Balkans through joint actions of Russia and France, using the Sultan’s decree of 1856 on the equality of the Christian and Muslim population. Thus, from the very beginning, Russia has sought to support national movements within a legal framework.¹⁵

The interest of Russian society in eastern affairs in the late 1850s - early 1860s was weakened by the defeat in the Crimean War, as well as by the understanding of the primacy of internal problems. A well-known public figure, a representative of the so-called “Moscow” trend of Slavophilism Ivan Aksakov noted in 1860 that the Slavic question interested only a narrow circle of Slavophiles in Russia.¹⁶ In the summer of the same year, he traveled through the lands of Krajina, Dalmatia and Croatia (Austria), Montenegro and Serbia (the Ottoman Empire) in order to prepare himself for future editorial work to promote Slavophile ideas. He also wished to know a situation existing in the Slav-populated provinces of the Austrian Empire and the Ottoman Empire to define the prospects for Russian influence in the Balkan region. The result of this trip was the beginning of the publication of the weekly newspaper “Den” (“Day”), which actively popularized the Slavic cause in Russia and abroad.

However, it cannot be said that during the period under consideration the Eastern question lost its significance for the Russian society. Interest to the East, especially to the traditional way of life and culture of the Ottoman peoples continued to be preserved in Russia.¹⁷ Ivan Aksakov’s newspaper “Den” enjoyed a steady demand not only in Russia, but also in the Slavic countries, where he had a high reputation.¹⁸ In the late 1850s, Russia’s policy of extending the rights of the Christian population of Turkey brought into life nongovernmental organizations in the form of Slavic committees, which operated in Moscow, St. Petersburg and Kiev. They were headed by renowned Slavophiles – Ivan Aksakov, Nil Popov, Fedor Chizhov and others. These were political organizations that, not limited to the aid of Orthodox schools and churches, also supported activists of the national liberation movement.¹⁹ During the period of the Cretan uprising of 1866-1869 many Russian newspapers sympathized with the desire of the people of the island to unite with Greece.²⁰ In the newspaper “Moskva” (the

¹⁴ *Восточный вопрос во внешней политике России в конце XVIII – начале XX века*, с. 159.

¹⁵ *История внешней политики России, вторая половина XIX века*, Москва: Международные отношения 1997, с. 61.

¹⁶ С. С. Беляков, “Южные славяне глазами московского славянофила: путешествие И.С. Аксакова по славянским землям: май-август 1860”, *Славянский альманах*, 2002, Москва, 2003, с. 107.

¹⁷ К. А. Жуков, *Восточный вопрос в историософской концепции К.Н. Леонтьева*, Москва: Алетейя 2006; К. А. Жуков, “Леонтьев и русский ориентализм”, *TURCICA et OTTOMANICA, сборник статей в честь 70-летия М. С. Мейера*, Москва, 2006.

¹⁸ С. С. Беляков, “Южные славяне глазами московского славянофила: путешествие И.С. Аксакова по славянским землям: май-август 1860”, *Славянский альманах*, 2002, Москва, 2003, с. 95.

¹⁹ *История внешней политики России, вторая половина XIX века*, с. 62.

²⁰ In 1866 on the island Crete the uprising broke out. The main demand of the insurgents was separation from the Ottoman Empire and unification with Greece. Among the great powers, only

editor of this newspaper was Aksakov) there were articles calling for help to “martyrs of Crete”.²¹ At that time, there was no complete unanimity among the Russian ruling elite and the social circles close to it with regard to the country’s foreign policy. Supporters of the so-called “national policy” (Mikhail Katkov, a well-known publicist of the conservative direction, editor of the newspaper “Moskovskie Vedomosti”, Nikolai Ignatiev, a Russian ambassador to Constantinople, etc.) insisted on a more resolute policy in the Balkan-Middle East direction to defend Russian interests.²² Nevertheless, considering unfavourable international situation of that time, the prudent foreign policy of Chancellor Gorchakov (he received this post in 1867) was more in line with the demand of the moment. Thus, the problems related to the Eastern question were constantly at the center of attention of the Russian public opinion. At the same time, in the mid-1860s the policy of the Russian government in the region was undergoing changes and becoming more active. This was facilitated by the strengthening of Russia’s influence in Serbia and Montenegro (Russian influence in Montenegro was completely restored in the early 1860s) due to Russia’s contribution to the achievement of practically independent status by these principalities. In 1867, the remaining Ottoman troops in Serbia were evacuated from the country.²³ On the other hand, since the mid-1860s the Russian-French relations had been gradually deteriorating because of France’s unwillingness, as the main guarantor of the Paris system, to admit strengthening of Russia’s positions in the Near East. Russia also failed to ameliorate significantly the living conditions the Christian population of the Ottoman Empire within the framework of bilateral relations, using the “sacred decree” of the Sultan (*Hutt-i-Humayun*).²⁴ The hostile attitude of the great powers to the Cretan uprising, which allowed the Ottoman government to localize and suppress the uprising, showed Russia the futility of hope for the great powers’ mediation in a regulation of conflicts in the Near East. As a result, a new approach to the situation in the Ottoman Empire emerged. It meant granting the Balkan peoples freedom of hands and non-interference of the European powers in interactions between the Porte and the Christian population of the empire. Russia’s position was largely determined by the desire to create in the Balkan-Middle East region a situation that would allow it to raise the issue of revising the restrictive articles of the Paris Treaty. In this regard, as early as 1864, the newspaper “Den” wrote: “The more holes in this treaty, the sooner it will be ruptured, and this cannot but be in the interests of our policy in the East.”²⁵

In this connection, at the Paris Congress of 1866, Russia supported the unification of the Danube principalities (Moldova and Wallachia) into the Roma-

Russia supported this demand. In view of this, at the beginning of 1869 the rebels were forced to stop resistance, and the sultan’s power was completely restored on the island.

²¹ *Восточный вопрос во внешней политике России в конце XVIII – начале XX века*, с. 171.

²² *Россия и Черноморские проливы (XVIII–XX столетия)*, с. 174.

²³ *История внешней политики России, вторая половина XIX века*, с. 74.

²⁴ *Восточный вопрос во внешней политике России в конце XVIII – начале XX века*, с.173.

²⁵ *Россия и Черноморские проливы (XVIII–XX столетия)*, с. 174.

nian state. From a formal point of view, it was a violation of the treaty and conventions of 1856.²⁶

In the Russian press of the second half of the 1860s, there were articles that summarized the development of the Eastern question and outlined the destinies of this international issue.²⁷ However, the only major work of this time, in which the general program for solving the Eastern question was formulated, was the book "Russia and Europe" by Nikolai Danilevsky, a philosopher and publicist of the Slavophile direction. The first chapters of this book were published in the journal "Zarya" in 1869. In 1871, Danilevsky's book was published in a separate edition.

Danilevsky elaborated his concept in the international circumstances of 1850s and 1860s: the Crimean War, the Polish uprising of 1863, and the Austro-Prussian War of 1866. At the heart of his historiosophical conception lay the theory that the historical process was a successive change of civilizations, each of which was determined by the cultural-historical type (CHT) of this or that nation. According to Danilevsky, the dominant Romano-German cultural and historical type should be replaced by the Slavic CHT.²⁸ In this connection, for him the Eastern question was a struggle "between two heterogeneous types (Slavic and Romano-Germanic – A. B.), the outcome of which should give a completely new content of the life of mankind."

In view of the inevitability of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the struggle between Slavs and Roman-German Europe, according to Danilevsky, was the final stage in the development of the Eastern question. He warned that "the already ripe Eastern question" made this struggle inevitable.²⁹

From the point of Russia's interests, a satisfactory solution to the Eastern question was the unification of all the Slavic peoples of Europe within the framework of the All-Slavic Federation. Russia was to be at the head of the Federation as it was the only Slavic country with the status of great power and, therefore, able to resolve conflicts within this association and ensure its external security.³⁰ Thus, Danilevsky transferred the idea of the Slavic Federation, that is a political union of the Slavs with Russia ahead fighting against a common enemy (the Ottoman Empire), into the sphere of a struggle of the united Slavs against Europe. An inevitable consequence of this struggle would be a change of the cultural-historical types. For Danilevsky the very existence of the Ottoman Empire was a continuation of the European policy aimed at hampering the unification of the Slavs. He considered Austria the main obstacle for the creation of the All-Slavic Federation.

²⁶ *Сборник договоров России с другими государствами*, с. 23-41.

²⁷ Э. К. Ватсон, "Первое пятидесятилетие Восточного вопроса", *Вестник Европы. Избранное, 1802-1881*, Москва 2002.

²⁸ Н. Я. Данилевский, *Россия и Европа. Взгляд на культурные и политические отношения славянского мира и романо-германского*, Санкт-Петербург 1871, с. 72–118, 499–541.

²⁹ Там же, с. 456, 460.

³⁰ Там же, с. 386–387, 410

Despite the pronounced Pan-Slavic views, Danilevsky was categorically opposed to any territorial seizures on the part of Russia in the event of the partition of the Ottoman Empire. Istanbul should not have become a part of Russia, thus violating its "life balance" and becoming the "bone of contention" among members of the All-Slavic Federation. Istanbul was to form an independent "Tsaregradsky District" on the basis of equal participation in the new association. According to Danilevsky:

The all-Slavic federation with Russia at the head and with the capital in Tsaregrad is the only reasonable and meaningful solution to the Great historical task, which has recently received the name of the Eastern question³¹.

The Federation itself, according to Danilevsky, was to consist of independent Slavic states. He stressed that this is not the absorption of Slavs by Russia, but the unification of all Slavic peoples in order to provide them with political and, most importantly, cultural development. In this respect, Danilevsky's most far-going conclusion was that "the All-Slavic Union is the only solid soil on which a genuine Slav culture can grow."³²

Thus, the solution to the Eastern question, according to Danilevsky, was to ensure the civilizational victory of the Slavic cultural-historical type over the Romano-Germanic one through the political association of the Slavs headed by Russia. Therefore, he was inclined to consider Russia's interests in the Eastern question (Istanbul and the Straits) in the context of the all-Slavic cause, believing that the solution of the Eastern question was possible only within the framework of the All-Slavic Federation.

Many historians treat the concept of Danilevsky as a "conservative utopia."³³ Other researchers are more objective, noting the priority of the cultural significance of Slavdom in the foreign policy concept of N. Ya. Danilevsky. It is emphasized that Danilevsky's historiosophy traced its roots "from the Russian soil ... and the tasks that arose in Russian public life", it was a reaction to the hostility of Europe.³⁴ Despite the fact that Danilevsky's concept received a negative evaluation among a large part of the Russian society, especially the liberal one, it had a strong influence on the representatives of post-reform Slavophilism - Ivan Aksakov, Konstantin Leontiev, Fedor Dostoevsky, etc.³⁵

The book of Nikolai Danilevsky was published in 1871 when Russian diplomacy denounced the articles of the Paris Treaty of 1856 on the neutral-

³¹ Там же, с. 408-409.

³² Там же, с. 411-412, 421.

³³ *История внешней политики России, вторая половина XIX века*, с. 308.

³⁴ В. М. Хевролина, *Власть и общество. Борьба в России по вопросам внешней политики в конце XIX в.*, Москва: ИРИ РАН 1999, с. 141.

³⁵ А. С. Птицын, "Концепция «славянской цивилизации» в оценке представителей пореформенного славянофильства и почвенничества", *Ставропольский альманах общества интеллектуальной истории*, Выпуск. 3, Ставрополь, 2003, с. 25.

ization of the Black Sea.³⁶ At a conference held in London in January-March 1871, Russia succeeded in cancellation of the articles of the Paris Treaty and the Russian-Turkish agreement of 30 March 1856, on restrictions on the presence of the Russia and the Ottoman navy in the Black Sea.³⁷

From that time onward, the legal status of the Black Sea Straits (until 1918) was based on the London Convention of 13 March 1871 and the Treaty of Paris (in the part that was not abolished). Despite the fact that the closed regime of the Black Sea Straits had changed more in favour of the Ottoman Empire, the mere fact of canceling the neutralization of the Black Sea was greeted with enthusiasm by the entire Russian society, the liberal and conservative press alike. Nevertheless, some newspapers – “Moskovskie Vedomosti”, “Russkie Vedomosti” and “St. Petersburg Vedomosti” – warned against reassessing the success of Russian diplomacy. Mikhail Katkov, editor of “Moskovskie Vedomosti”, noted that changing the wording of the closure of the Straits represented a potential threat as an enemy’s fleet (primarily British) received the right to enter the Black Sea.³⁸ In this light the press proposed to begin the immediate restoration of the Russian navy in the Black Sea.³⁹

Thus, in the late 1850s- early 1870s the Eastern question was still relevant for Russian society. At the same time, events related to the Crimean War, the need to eliminate the consequences of defeat and carry out domestic reforms, led to a decrease in the importance of the Eastern question from the point of view of public interest compared to previous periods. The evidence of it is the absence of major works devoted to this problem (with the exception of Nikolai Danilevsky’s book) and the weakening of Russian society’s attention to the state of affairs in the Balkans.

However, gradually, with the strengthening of internal and external position of Russia in the mid-1860s, the interest of the society to the Eastern question revived. It was conservatives and Slavophiles who paid substantial attention to foreign policy issues.

³⁶ *Россия и Черноморские проливы (XVIII-XX столетия)*, с. 174–193

³⁷ *Сборник договоров России с другими государствами*, с. 108.

³⁸ *Восточный вопрос во внешней политике России в конце XVIII – начале XX века*, с. 191.

³⁹ *История внешней политики России, вторая половина XIX века*, с. 78-79.

Öz

Doğu Sorunu ve 1850'lerin Sonu-1870'lerin Başında Rus Toplumu

1850'lerin sonunda ve 1870'lerin başında Doğu Sorunu Rusya toplumu açısından halen güncelliğini koruyordu. Bu arada Kırım Savaşı'yla bağlantılı olaylar, yenilginin etkilerinden kurtulma ve iç reformların gerçekleştirilmesinin gerekliliği Doğu Sorununa yönelik Rusya toplumunun ilgisinin bir önceki döneme nazaran azalmasına neden oldu. Bununla birlikte altmışların ortasında Rusya'nın iç ve dış pozisyonunun değişmesi, Doğu Sorununa toplumsal bir ilgiyi doğurdu. Dış politika sorunları muhafazakar ve Slavofillerin dikkatini çekti.

Anahtar kelimeler: Doğu Sorunu, Balkanlar, Karadeniz Boğazları, Rus Toplumu, Muhafazakar ve Slavofiller

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