

## Eastern Question: Great Eastern Crisis

### Great Eastern Crisis

In 1875, the territory of Herzegovina rebelled against its ruler, the Sultan, in the now famous Herzegovinian rebellion, which led to insurrection in the Province of Bosnia as well as in Bulgaria. The Great Powers believed that their intervention was necessary, lest a disastrous and bloody war break out in the Balkans. The first to act were the members of the League of the Three Emperors Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia, whose common attitude toward the Eastern Question was embodied in the Andrassy Note named for the Hungarian diplomat Julius, Count Andrassy. The Note, seeking to avoid a widespread conflagration in Southeastern Europe, urged the Sultan to institute various reforms, including one granting religious liberty to Christians. A joint commission of Christians and Muslims was to be established to ensure the enactment of the appropriate reforms. With the approval of the United Kingdom and France, the Note was submitted to the Sultan, whose agreement was secured on 31 January 1876. The Herzegovinian leaders, however, rejected the proposal, pointing out that the Sultan had already made promises to institute reforms but had failed to fulfill them.

Representatives of the Three Emperors met once again in Berlin, where they approved the Berlin Memorandum. To convince the Herzegovinians that the Sultan would indeed keep his promises, the Memorandum suggested that international representatives be allowed to oversee the institution of reforms in the rebelling provinces. Before the Memorandum could be approved by the Porte, the Ottoman Empire was convulsed by internal strife, which led to the deposition of Sultan Abd-ul-Aziz. The new Sultan, Murad V, was himself deposed three months later due to his mental instability, bringing Abd-ul-Hamid II to power. In the meantime, the hardships of the Ottomans had increased; their treasury was empty, and they faced an insurrection not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also in Serbia, Montenegro and Bulgaria the so-called April uprising. Still, the Ottoman Empire managed to crush the insurgents in August 1876. The result incommoded Russia, which had planned to take possession of various Ottoman territories in Southeastern Europe in the course of the conflict.

After the uprising was largely suppressed, however, rumours of Ottoman atrocities against the rebellious population shocked European sensibilities. Russia now intended to enter the war on the side of the rebels, for she hoped to take advantage of the situation to acquire some of the Ottoman possessions in Southeastern Europe. A further attempt for peace was made by delegates of the Great Powers who now numbered six due to the rise of Italy assembled at the Constantinople Conference in 1876. The Sultan, however, refused to compromise his independence by allowing international representatives to oversee the institution of reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 1877, the Great Powers once again attempted to negotiate with the Ottoman Empire, but their proposals continued to meet with rejection.

Russia declared war on 24 April 1877. Her chancellor Prince Gorchakov had effectively purchased Austrian neutrality with the Reichstadt Agreement, under which Ottoman territories captured in the course of the war would be partitioned between the Russian and Austria-Hungarian Empires, with the latter obtaining Bosnia and Herzegovina. The United Kingdom, though still fearing the Russian threat to British dominance in Southern Asia, did not involve herself in the conflict. However, when Russia threatened to secure Constantinople, British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli urged Austria and Germany to ally with him against this tyrannical war aim. As a result, Russia sued for peace through the Treaty of San Stefano, which imposed harsh terms: the Empire was to grant independence to Romania, Serbia, and Montenegro; to grant autonomy to Bulgaria; to institute reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina; and to cede the Dobruja and parts of Armenia to Russia, which would also be paid an enormous

indemnity. As Russia could dominate the newly independent states, her influence in Southeastern Europe was greatly increased by the Treaty of San Stefano. Due to the insistence of the Great Powers especially the United Kingdom, the treaty was heavily revised at the Congress of Berlin so as to reduce the great advantages acquired by Russia.

The Treaty of Berlin adjusted the boundaries of the newly independent states in the Ottoman Empire's favour. Furthermore, Bulgaria was divided into two separate states Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia, as it was feared that a single state would be susceptible to Russian domination. Ottoman cessions to Russia were largely sustained, and Bosnia and Herzegovina though still nominally within the Ottoman Empire were transferred to Austrian control. In addition, the Ottoman island of Cyprus was given to the United Kingdom via a secret agreement made between the United Kingdom and the Ottoman Empire. These final two procedures were predominantly forced by Disraeli, who was famously described by Otto von Bismarck as "The old Jew, that is the man," after his level-headed Palmerstonian approach to the Eastern Question.