

# Crimean War

## I. INTRODUCTION

Crimean War (1853-1856), military conflict between Russia and a coalition of Great Britain, France, the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia, and the Ottoman Empire (now Turkey); it was a major turning point in the political history of post-Napoleonic Europe

## II. THE EASTERN QUESTION

The roots of the conflict lay in the **Eastern Question** posed by the continuing decay of the Ottoman Empire, a development fraught with explosive implications for the European balance of power. Since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Russia had become more eager to take advantage of this situation to increase its influence in the Balkans and to wrest from the Ottoman Empire control of the straits between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. After their victory in the Russo-Turkish War of 1828 to 1829 and especially with the Treaty of Unkiar-Skelessi (1833), the Russians moved toward the establishment of a unilateral protectorate over the Ottoman Empire.

Britain and France viewed the possibility of Russian control of the straits as a threat to their own interests in the Middle East, and many in those countries despised Russia as the despotic enemy of liberalism. Austria too, despite a long tradition of diplomatic cooperation with Russia, was uneasy about the growing Russian influence in the Balkans. In 1841, the European powers and the Ottoman Empire managed to replace the Unkiar-Skelessi agreement with a general European protectorate.

## III. THE WAR CRISIS

By the early 1850s, however, Tsar Nicholas I of Russia believed he saw another opportunity to further Russian influence by intervention in Ottoman affairs. He felt confident of grateful support from Austria in return for the aid Russia had given the Habsburg dynasty during the revolutions of 1848 to 1850. He also believed, mistakenly, that the British government of George Hamilton-Gordon, 4<sup>th</sup> earl of Aberdeen, would collaborate in a partition of the Balkan territories controlled by the Ottomans.<sup>1</sup>

The immediate pretext for Russian intervention was a dispute between Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians over control of the holy places in Palestine, which was part of the Ottoman Empire. In December 1852 the Ottoman sultan, responding to French pressure, decided in favor of the Roman Catholics. Nicholas I, the protector of Orthodoxy, quickly dispatched a mission to Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey), aiming at a new settlement in favor of the Orthodox and a treaty guaranteeing the rights of the Orthodox population of the Ottoman Empire. At the same time, in discussions with the British ambassador to Russia, Nicholas I raised the possibility of a partition of the Balkans and a “*temporary*” Russian occupation of Constantinople and the straits.

The British ambassador to Constantinople, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe, helped arrange an amicable settlement of the holy places question, but persuaded the Ottomans to reject the other Russian demands as a threat to their sovereignty. Russia responded on July 1, 1853, by occupying the Ottoman principalities of Moldavia and Walachia. The European powers attempted to arrange a compromise, but this proved futile. On October 4, confident of British and French support, the Ottoman government declared war.

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<sup>1</sup> Read why Russia thought Great Britain would support Russian claims in a separate article

#### IV. THE WAR

On November 30 a Russian attack destroyed the Ottoman fleet at the Black Sea port of Sinope, resulting in a public outcry in Britain and France. In March 1854, after Russia ignored their demand to evacuate Moldavia and Walachia, Britain and France declared war. They were later joined by the Italian kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia which, needing help in its plans to expel Austria from the smaller Italian kingdoms, hoped to gain favor with Great Britain and France. On June 3, Austria, to Russia's dismay, threatened to declare war unless Russia evacuated Moldavia and Walachia. Russia complied on August 5, and Austrian troops occupied the principalities.

The allies then decided on a campaign against Sevastopol in the Crimea, headquarters of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, and their forces landed in Crimea in September 1854. Despite bloody victories over the Russians at the Alma River, Balaklava, and Inkerman, the war dragged on, as the Russians refused to accept the allies' peace terms. Finally, on September 9, 1855, Sevastopol fell, but only after Austria threatened to enter the war did Russia agree to make peace.

The Treaty of Paris, signed on March 30, 1856, was a major setback for Russia's Middle Eastern policy. Russia was forced to return southern Bessarabia and the mouth of the Danube to the Ottoman Empire; Moldavia, Walachia, and Serbia were placed under an international rather than a Russian guarantee; the sultan limited himself to vague promises to respect the rights of all his Christian subjects; and the Russians were forbidden to maintain a navy on the Black Sea.

In military terms, the war was a blundering, needlessly costly affair. The commanders on both sides proved remarkably inept, squandering lives in senseless engagements like the famed "*Charge of the Light Brigade*" in which a British unit suffered severe losses during the Battle of Balaklava. Supply services for both armies were hampered by inefficiency and corruption, and medical services were appalling. The British nurse Florence Nightingale won fame by her efforts to improve the care of the sick and wounded, but more men died of disease than in battle.

Nevertheless, the war was an event of major significance in European history. It marked the collapse of the arrangement whereby the victors of the Napoleonic Wars – Great Britain, Russia, Austria and Prussia – had cooperated to maintain peace in Europe for four decades. The myth of Russian might was laid to rest, and the breakup of the old coalition permitted Germany and Italy to free themselves from Austrian influence and emerge as nations in the decade that followed. Finally, the shock of the Crimean defeat was the catalyst for a program of sweeping internal reform in Russia under Nicholas I's successor, Alexander II.