THE CRIMEA WAR,
1853 - 1856

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Monthly Strategy Report
April 2014
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“We are in the midst of an international conflict that may have important economic consequences in the medium term for Russia and other nations due to the measures that might be adopted. Russia’s influence in the Black Sea region and the question of its access to the Mediterranean has been a matter of maximum geopolitical interest for centuries. In the mid-19th century, the break-up of the increasingly anachronistic Ottoman Empire was evident and only the interest that European powers had in avoiding conflict in the event of chaotic collapse maintained a Turkish presence in Europe and the Middle East. Let us look again at the Crimea conflict of the 19th century”.

In the mid-19th century, the Ottoman Empire still had nominal control over large swathes of Eastern Europe and the Middle East, although it was nevertheless clear to the major European powers that it was incapable of defending these territories as a result of its technological, industrial and military backwardness, which became especially plain to see after the independence of Greece in 1821 following armed conflict.

Even so, the Ottoman Empire still had important Catholic and Orthodox Christian populations and holy sites under its control, including Jerusalem. As a form of more or less indirect intervention in the Turkish downfall, European powers (through agreements with an increasingly weak Sultan) sought the protection of Christian populations and places of worship, if necessary. In particular, Russia was the guardian of the Orthodox faith and France that of Catholicism, as the result of a series of agreements in the 1830s.

In such a situation, serious tension grew between Orthodox and Catholic monks for control of the Church of the Nativity in Belen and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. The conflict escalated rapidly, with both parties petitioning the Sultan with irreconcilable requests, forcing him to take sides in the matter. He came down on the side of Catholicism and, indirectly, in favour of France, which was seen as the country that safeguarded Catholics in the Empire.

This position greatly displeased Czar Nicholas I, who swiftly sent Prince Aleksandr Menshikov, a rather aggressive ambassador, to the Sultan. Menshikov was a veteran of the Russian Army, who had seen action in the Napoleonic Wars and Russo-Turkish wars that had led to the Russian Empire taking control of half the Black Sea region, and specifically, the Crimea peninsula, which had fallen to Russia in 1778 after the expulsion of Turks and Tartars. Prince Menshikov was therefore a well-known figure, at the Istanbul Court and he duly brought all the pressure he could to bear on the Sultan to revise the protection agreements he had with Christian throughout his Empire, through the signing of a treaty which would give Russia greater margin to intervene in Turkey. The British Ambassador, Lord Stratford, came to hear of these negotiations and finally managed to convince the Sultan that this new agreement would endanger geopolitical stability in the Eastern Mediterranean. As a result, the Russian offer was rejected.

The underlying interest here was not to so much to protect the interests of Christian monks in Palestine, but rather to guard against the risk to European powers that Russia posed should it either have direct access to the Mediterranean or else control the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, which would increase the operationality of its fleet in the Black Sea. In previous decades, Russia had gained access to the Baltic Sea (at the expense of Sweden) and the Black Sea (at the expense of Turkey, in Crimea). In both cases the results had been fairly similar: Russia had swiftly established naval bases, forming powerful navies which had established its maritime supremacy in the region. Furthermore, control over the Mediterranean was of fundamental importance to European powers, ensuring
supply lines and trade routes to Africa, where full-scale colonization was under way. The presence of a powerful Russian fleet was evidently undesirable to French and British interests.

Therefore, when Russia received word that the Sultan had turned down its request, it reacted very aggressively, invading and annexing Ottoman-controlled regions in Moldavia and Wallachia, advancing up the Black Sea coast and to the south of the Danube in the direction of the Straits and the Mediterranean. The four major European powers (Britain, France, Germany and Austria) declared their neutrality in the conflict and sought to negotiate with the parties in dispute at that time - Russia and Turkey - in search of a mutually-agreeable solution. However, European positions were polarized: France and Britain sent powerful fleets to the Dardanelles Strait in case the conflict escalated (as we have said, the main objective was to avoid an operational Russian fleet in the Mediterranean), while Austria and Germany were more passive, as they felt that a gradual fall of the Turkish Empire would allow them to gain territory in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, creating an area of influence that had been denied them in the Americas and Africa.

Negotiations failed and the Sultan decided to send his armies to war, with disastrous results. The Turkish attack not only failed to halt the Russian advance but the Turkish fleet was almost totally destroyed at the Battle of Sinop, completely changing the balance of forces in the region and leaving the Russians with absolute operational capacity to advance toward the sea. Given this situation, France and Britain issued Russia with an ultimatum: either it agreed to retire north of the Danube or they would join the war on the side of the Turks. Russia was confident that Germany and Austria would support their cause, or would at least remain neutral. This was not the case however, and although they did not join the conflict, they opted to support the French and the British, helping them in their operations.

Despite this reverse, Russia refused to withdraw, and thus France and Britain declared war, putting their combined force of 650,000 men together with the 300,000 Turks against a Russian Army of 1,200,000 men. In April 1854, the combined Anglo-French fleet shelled Odessa, although troops were unable to disembark. Nevertheless, the city of Sevastopol, the Black Sea base for the Russian fleet, was besieged.

The blockade of Sevastopol represented the de facto loss of the fleet, to which Russia responded by launching a series of major offensives in order to recover operationality. Firstly, the Battle of Balaclava (October 1854), which saw the famous Thin Red Line and the Charge of the Light Brigade, at which a number of light cavalry divisions led an old-fashioned style charge against positions held by Russian artillery and grenadiers who cut down the British en masse. Industrial advances since the Napoleonic Wars and the new importance of the artillery had totally changed the way that wars would now be fought. The battle was a disaster for the British forces, who suffered heavy losses; nevertheless, the Russians were unable to relieve Sevastopol.

A few days later, the Russians launched another offensive, the Battle of Inkerman, although this time, the British had learned their lesson and changed their tactics. The Russians failed to lift the siege of Sevastopol, although they did inflict serious losses on both the French and British armies, which meant they were unable to take the port city before the Russian winter closed in, causing terrible hardship among the troops.

In spite of everything, Sevastopol finally fell in September 1855, forcing Russia to seek an armistice, signed in Paris in 1856. The political consequence of the conflict were wide-ranging, with some of these sowing the seeds for the First World War. The Turkish Empire stumbled on, zombie-like in Europe, while Russia lost the cordial relations it had enjoyed with Central European powers, with whom they had fought Napoleon just a few decades earlier. Pressure increased on the Balkans, which were still nominally under Turkish rule yet increasingly subject to nationalist sentiments fuelled by
neighbouring powers, especially as a result of the new poor relations between Austria and Russia.

As far as Russia was concerned, the armistice represented a significant loss of influence in the region. Apart from having to return the regions it had occupied to the Turks, the Black Sea was declared to be neutral, meaning it was forbidden to base armies or navies along its coast or in its waters. In the Baltic, extensive regions within the Grand Duchy of Finland (part of Russia at that time) were demilitarized, paving the way for its subsequent independence in 1917.

War had changed, as technological advances began to be integrated within the military sphere, altering the rules employed, as would be evident in the first months of the First World War, at Verdun. Even so, the Crimea War was a bloodbath, with 250,000 combatants and 750,000 civilians losing their lives. The Crimea War was also the first war to be documented photographically and by war correspondents. As a consequence, news coming out of the region and the scandal regarding the cruelty of the conflict had a significant effect on the civilian population, who had previously only heard epic tales of the heroic deeds of their troops.

The current dispute over the Crimea peninsula does not look like resulting in armed conflict, although it is having economic consequences as a result of the measures that Western countries are taking. At the moment, these measures are still very limited, however, in the medium-term, they are likely to hit harder, having a significant affect on the world energy map.