

Magadh Mahila College

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HISTORY

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HISTORY OF MODERN EUROPE

Unit – 7

EASTERN QUESTION

**Topic: - THE EASTERN QUESTION
(UP TO THE WAR OF GREEK
INDEPENDENCE)**

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Introduction

AFTER THE sack of Constantinople by the Muslims in 1453, the Ottoman Turks carved out a vast empire in south-eastern Europe and along the north coast of Africa in the 16th and 17th centuries. There were bitter wars between them and the Christian rulers of Europe. In 1682 the Turks over-ran Hungary and in 1683 appeared at the very gates of Vienna and Emperor Leopold I was terribly hard-pressed. The existence of the Holy Roman Empire itself was in danger. But John III (Sobieski), King of Poland, came to his rescue and defeated the Turks. The siege of Vienna was raised and the wave of Turkish conquests was halted.

With this defeat began a steady decline of the Turkish Empire which continued right up to the end of the First World War. This steady and gradual fall of the Turkish Empire gave rise to an "intractable and interwoven tangle of conflicting interests" and to "the problem of filling up the vacuum created by the gradual disappearance of the Turkish Empire from Europe". This problem has been popularly called the "Eastern Question". A Russian diplomat has defined the problem in the following words, "This damned Eastern Question is like a gout. Sometimes it takes you in the leg, sometimes it nips your hand. One is lucky if it does not fly to the stomach". Throughout the 19th century the whole, Balkan Peninsula was in a state of turmoil and if revolt was quelled in one part, it made its appearance in another.

So the Eastern Question seized the minds of European diplomats, baffled them and defied a satisfactory solution. The question was further complicated on account of the divergent and conflicting interests of the Great Powers.



What the "Eastern Question" was

The Question included the following problems:

(1) Future of Subject Races. What was to happen to the Balkan States like Bulgaria, Serbia, Rumania, Greece, etc. as the Ottoman Empire declined, or as the "sick man of Europe", viz. Turkey, became more and more sick?

(2) Control of the Black and Mediterranean Seas. With this question was inevitably associated the control of the Black Sea, the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. If the Turkish power declined, should Russia be allowed to control them and thus gain access to the Mediterranean?

Factors which made it Intricate and Complicated

It was made exceedingly complicated by the following factors:

(a) Religious. The presence of a foreign militant religious element in Christian Europe gave rise to bitter religious disputes between the Muslims and the Christians. A very large majority of the Sultan's subjects in the Balkans were Christians and belonged to the Orthodox Church. They had suffered long from religious persecution and Muslim atrocities. They wanted to throw off the Sultan's yoke. Russia which also professed the Orthodox religion championed their cause and posed as their protector.

(b) Rise of Nationalism. French Revolutionary principles and the Napoleonic wars had also roused a spirit of nationalism among the people of the Balkans. The Serbs, the Greeks, the Rumanians, etc. wanted to achieve their national independence from the Porte (The Sultan of Turkey). But the existence of a number of nationalities further complicated the problem. They spoke different languages and had separate social customs and there was no possibility of their joining together and making common cause against the Porte.

(c) Economic Rivalry. Turkey controlled the trade routes to, the East and both France and England were eager to maintain the communications with their eastern

empires intact. Though they would not like Turkey to be weak they would not like Russian influence to extend southward.

(d) Political Rivalry: (i) **Russian Attitude.** Russia, which, since the days of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, had been trying to expand southward at the cost of Turkey, saw in her steady decline a suitable opportunity to achieve her aim and to acquire control of the Black Sea, the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles and also gain access to the Mediterranean Sea. She regarded Turkey as utterly barbarian and insisted that her relations with the Ottoman Empire were only her "domestic concern". She would not permit any foreign intervention. Therefore, she fished in the troubled waters of the Balkan peninsula and by the Treaty of Kutchuk Kainardji (1774) acquired the right to protect the Christian subjects of the Sultan. Posing as protector and saviour of the Slav Christians she was determined to substitute, her influence for that of the Porte in the Balkans.

(ii) British and French Attitude. The British and French suffered from Russophobia and would not allow Russia to expand southward, because they feared that Russian influence in the Balkans and her control of the Mediterranean might endanger their communications with the East. Hence any attempt by her to oust the Turks from the Balkans, was likely to be resisted by both of them. They were interested in maintaining the status quo as far as possible and did not want to weaken Turkey unduly.

(iii) Austrian Attitude. Metternich, the great reactionary upholder of the principle of legitimacy, would not countenance any revolutionary movements in the Balkans and believed in maintaining the Sultan's authority unimpaired. Any attempt by the subject races to overthrow the Porte's sovereignty as to be resisted in the interest of 'the safety of the Austrian Empire which was also composed of a number of subject races. Nor should Russia be allowed to expand her Influence in the Balkans because Austria too had her eyes on the provinces of Bosnia, Herzegovina and Dalmatia.

(e) Disaffection of Turkish Governors. Ambitious and disloyal governors, like Ali of Janina and Mehmet Ali of Egypt who desired to carve out independent principalities

for themselves further complicated the question. How then was this thorny question to be settled? It did not lead itself to an easy solution on account of the divergence of creeds, nationalities and social customs of the people of the Balkans and on account of the conflicting interests and rivalries of the Great Powers. Yet, in spite of them, one by one the Balkan people struggled for their independence in the 19th century and achieved it.

THE STRUGGLE FOR SERBIAN INDEPENDENCE

The Serbs were the first to rebel against the Turks, whose hold on Serbia was nominal. Imbued with the spirit of nationality they rose in revolt against the suzerain power in 1804, under the leadership of Kara George who gained temporary success. But on account of the rivalry and jealousy of another Serbian named Milos Obrenovitch, Kara George was killed in 1817 and Turkish authority was restored. Turkish atrocities and tyranny once again roused the Serbs who raised the banner of revolt under Obrenovitch. The Serbs succeeded in gaining a limited amount of local autonomy though, the sovereignty of the Sultan was maintained. During and after the War of Greek Independence further concessions were granted to the Serbs and by the Treaty of Adrianople (1829) the complete autonomy of the Serbs was recognized.

THE WAR OF GREEK INDEPENDENCE (1821-32)

Its Causes

The Greeks enjoyed greater political autonomy and privileges than any of the other Christian subjects of the Porte, They held high offices and for some time even the Foreign Office was under a Greek. They were skilful mariners and had built a powerful fleet which stood them in good stead in their struggle against the Turks. Even the Greek Patriarch, the Head of the Orthodox Church, had privileged relations with the Porte. He was the official link between the Turks and the Greeks and was "a kind of Under Secretary to the Grand Vizier for the affairs of the Orthodox Christians". Having been

granted more concessions and being more sensitive than others they resented the Turkish tyranny and atrocities and desired to overthrow the Turkish yoke.



The Greek had not forgotten their ancient glory though they had degenerated considerably. A national awakening roused by poets and philosophers like Adamantios Korais (1748-1833) and Rigas (1753-98) infused a new spirit in them. The Greek language was purified and a love of the old classic Greek was instilled in the people, and national songs roused a wave of phil-Hellenism in them. Consequently, an urge to revive the old Orthodox Empire of Byzantium took hold of them.

The French Revolutionary movement and the secret societies had a profound influence on the Greeks who organized themselves in 1814 at Odessa into a secret society known as Filiki Eteria. Like the Carbonari of Italy, it aimed at achieving national independence and establishing a Greek Empire. A large number of volunteers were enlisted and a sense of unity and coherence was created among the people. "Emboldened by impunity, the society began to make preparations for an actual rising."

Ali Pasha, a Governor of the Sultan, rose in revolt and carved out an independent principality along the Albanian seaboard. The Porte's preoccupation with this rising offered a suitable opportunity to the Greek patriots to overthrow the Turkish suzerainty.

The Course of the Struggle

The first Greek revolt took place under "Alexander Hypsilanti (Ypsilanti) a member of the powerful Greek Phanariot family from Moldavia and now an officer in the Russian army and also an aide-de-campo to the Tsar. He hoped to secure Russian help as Count Capo d'Istria, a Greek, was a minister of the Tsar. The news of his revolt reached the Great Powers at the Congress of Laibach (1821). The English reaction was one of sympathy, because, having enjoyed nationalism at home, the English habitually supported nationalism abroad. But Metternich the arch-enemy of all liberal movements and a stern upholder of the principle of legitimacy denounced it. He feared that if the revolt succeeded it might spread to the Danubian basin and cause ruination of the Austrian Empire. Tsar Alexander was in a dilemma. Was he to uphold the Christian principles of the Holy Alliance and help the Christian Greeks against the 'infidel' Turks, or was he to support the principle of legitimacy and decry the Greek revolt against the legitimate authority of the Porte? But Metternich's influence was overbearing and he was persuaded to issue a proclamation disavowing all sympathy with the Greeks and bidding the rebels to return to the allegiance of the Sultan. As no help came from Russia, the rising collapsed in June, 1821 and Hypsilanti fled to Austria where he was caught and imprisoned. He died in exile in 1828.

But before the revolt in Moldavia was suppressed another rising under the auspices of the Philike Hetairia was organized in Morea. The rebel leaders were Anagnostas and Kolokotronis. Archbishop Germanos of Patras also joined the insurrection which enveloped the mainland as well as the islands in the Aegean Sea. The struggle was marked by terrible atrocities on both sides. The Greeks massacred about 25,000 Turks in Morea and captured Tripolitza where even the prisoners were slaughtered. "The Turks shall live no longer, neither in Morea nor in the whole earth," was the Greek battle cry.

The Turks retaliated and in their turn massacred the Greeks. So "the war was from the outset, one of barbarians against barbarians". On 22 April 1821, Sultan Mahmud II (1808-39) deposed the patriarch Gregorios who was responsible for the good behaviour of the Christian people and on Easter Day (23 April 1821) he, was hanged, still in his

robes, outside his palace in Constantinople. "The execution of the Patriarch was worse than a crime, it was a mistake." It shocked the entire Christian world. Thereafter national and religious feelings were stirred to their depths' in Russia, Which was the protector of the Christian', people. The cry for a crusade rent the sky. Tsar Alexander was incensed at the treatment meted out to his co-religionists and recalled the Russian ambassador and sent an ultimatum to Turkey asking her to comply with the following demands within eight days:

- (1) Greek Churches should be restored immediately.
- (2) Christians should be guaranteed protection and security.
- (3) The Turkish government should allow Russia to pacify the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia.

The Sultan did not answer within eight days and a War between Turkey and Russia seemed imminent.

The Greek struggle for independence had a two-fold aspect from the very beginning. Firstly, the Greeks desired to win freedom from the Porte's yoke and, secondly, Russia wanted to take advantage of the struggle to enhance her own influence in the Balkans.

Diplomatic Activity– the Difficulties of the Great Powers

Feverish diplomatic activity went on in all European capitals to solve the tangle while the Greeks continued their stubborn resistance against the Turks and proclaimed their independence in January 1822.

Attitude of England. In the past, Castlereagh, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, who had become a great friend of Metternich, had protested, but acquiesced in "the collective system for enforcing discipline in foreign lands". But Canning, who succeeded him in 1822, was an "exponent of popular and liberal diplomacy". He would not accept this principle and would not support the Holy Alliance' Powers to enforce

reactionary measures to suppress nationalism and liberalism. He was determined to prevent them from intervening in the internal affairs of foreign countries. He sympathized with the Greeks but, at the same time, he did not want to weaken Turkey. Nor would he allow Russia to coerce the Sultan.

Attitude of Austria. Metternich regarded the insurrection as a manifestation of revolutionary temper and he was averse to reopening the Eastern Question. So under Austrian and British pressure the Porte yielded to the Russian demand and evacuated the principalities. The danger of a Russo-Turkish war receded for the time being.

The Turks failed to suppress the Greek uprising on account of the latter's superiority at sea. They indulged in terrible atrocities and thousands of Greeks were massacred at Chios in April 1822. In June, the Greek rebel leader Kanaris burnt the Turkish flagship. This event was hailed by all the Christian people. Greek heroism attracted the admiration and sympathy of the people of Europe who joined the Greek rebel army in large numbers. Lord Byron, the English poet, lent the mighty support of his pen and sword and laid down his life in the cause of Greek freedom.

Further Diplomatic Activity

Canning was deeply stirred by Greek tenacity and felt horrified at the brutality of the Turks. Under popular pressure he recognized the Greeks as belligerents in March 1823.

In order to solve the problem, Tsar Alexander proposed a conference of Great Powers at St. Petersburg to arrange joint intervention on the basis of Greek autonomy under the suzerainty of the Porte. But Metternich opposed the proposal. He preferred complete independence for Greece. He thought that autonomous Greece would be ultimately under the influence of Russia. Canning was averse to any coercion of the Porte and since the Greek rebels had refused to be bound by the decision of the Conference, he was not enthusiastic about it.

As the Sultan could not quell the revolt himself in 1825 he invited Mehmet Ali, the Viceroy of Egypt, to help him. Mehmet Ali was promised the suzerainty of Crete and Pashalik of Syria. His son Ibrahim Pasha landed in South Morea and indulged in wild

and terrible massacres. He easily defeated the Greeks and laid the country desolate. Thousands of Christian people were exterminated and women and children were sold into slavery. The Turkish atrocities roused the conscience of the Christian world. Once again the Russians clamoured for war.

Canning suggested joint intervention to Russia but at the same time made it clear that he would not permit any coercion of the Porte. Tsar Alexander threatened to take action by himself but before he could he died in December 1825. He was succeeded by his brother Nicholas I. Canning renewed the offer of joint action and sent Wellington as special envoy in February 1826 to congratulate the Tsar on his accession and to settle the basis of joint intervention. Canning did not want to give a free hand to Russia lest her influence might become preponderant in the "Near East". In April 1826, England and Russia arrived at an agreement by the Protocol of St. Petersburg on the basis of Greek autonomy under the Sultan's suzerainty. It was a personal triumph for Canning. But it only solved the Greek question, it did not settle the relations between Turkey and Russia.

But while the negotiations were going on, Russia sent an ultimatum to Turkey on 26 March 1826, and presented the following demands:

- (1) Turkish police must be withdrawn from the Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia.
- (2) Serbian deputies must be released.
- (3) Turkish plenipotentiaries should be sent to the frontier to have a final settlement.

Threatened by the Russian ultimatum, Mahmud carried out army reforms in June 1826. But the Turkish military caste, known as the Janissaries, disapproved of them and revolted against him. Though many of them were massacred, the Sultan was not in a position to ignore the ultimatum. Realizing that discretion was the better part of valour he came to an agreement with Russia. By the Treaty of Akkerman, October 1826, all Russian demands were accepted and full diplomatic relations were renewed.

The dispute between Russia and Turkey seemed to be solved but Turco-Greek hostility continued. Ibrahim's war of ruthless extermination and depopulation of Morea

angered the civilized world, The Greeks, in despair, appealed to England for help. Under Canning's inspiration, the Protocol of St. Petersburg was converted into the Treaty of London in July 1827. England, Russia and France decided on joint intervention. Austria and Prussia kept aloof.

- (1) Armistice was to be offered to the belligerents, and
- (2) Greece was to be granted autonomy under the suzerainty of the Sultan.

The allies decided to take joint action and sent their fleets to enforce the armistice. The Greeks accepted mediation, but the Porte indignantly rejected any intervention by foreign powers.

The Battle of Navarino (20 October 1827)

The combined fleets declared a "pacific" blockade of Navarino bay and were determined to put a stop to Turkish atrocities. But a chance shot by the Turks: on the allied fleet caused a naval battle and the Turco-Egyptian fleet was destroyed.

Effects of the Battle

(1) English Reaction-the Policy of Wellington. Canning died in August 1827 and Wellington who succeeded him reversed his policy. England regarded the battle as most unfortunate and the king in his speech referred to it as "an untoward event". The integrity and independence of the Ottoman Empire must be maintained and traditional friendly relations with her must be restored. Thus he completely ignored Canning's diplomacy and withdrew from the war and allowed Russia to fight against the Turks single-handed.

(2) Setback to Metternich's Policy. It was a great blow to the "Metternich system". The Russian Tsar was openly supporting the rebels against the "legitimate" authority.

(3) Blow to Turkish Navy. The destruction of their fleet made it impossible for the Turks to suppress the Greek revolt. Greek independence was almost ensured.

(4) Turkish Demand for Compensation. Turkey claimed compensation for the destruction of the Turkish fleet, but England refused to entertain the demand.

Russo-Turkish War (1828)

On 20 December 1827, the Sultan repudiated the Treaty of Akkerman and declared a holy war on Russia. In Russia too there was a popular demand for action against Turkey and so the Tsar declared war early in 1828. He himself took the field and the Russian forces occupied the Principalities.

England and France thereupon felt alarmed and concluded a protocol and decided to intervene. The French despatched their troops to Morea, but meanwhile the English navy, demonstrated before Alexandria and forced Mehmet Ali to Sign the Convention of Alexandria in July 1828. Mehmet Ali agreed to evacuate Morea and to exchange prisoners. The Russian navy declared a blockade of the Dardanelles and the Russian army under Diebitsch continued its advance and in September captured Adrianople without firing a shot. Constantinople itself was in danger and so the Turks sued for peace.

The Treaty of Adrianople (September 1829).

- (1) The Porte accepted the Treaty of London and Greek independence under Turkish suzerainty was recognized.
- (2) The Danubian principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia became autonomous under the protection of Russia.
- (3) Autonomy was granted to the Serbs.
- (4) Russian title to Georgia and Caucasus was recognized.
- (5) Russian traders in the Balkans would be exclusively under the jurisdiction of the Russian Consuls.

Its Importance and Reaction.

- (a) It considerably enhanced Russian prestige and influence in the Balkans.
- (b) Russia claimed all credit for the independence of Greece. The principle of nationality triumphed over the principle of legitimacy.

(c) It roused the jealousy of the Great Powers who were alarmed at Russian expansion in the Principalities. Hence England and Austria proposed the following solution of the Greek problem:

- (i) Greece should be fully independent and should be a monarchy.
- (ii) The crown was offered to Leopold of Coburg.

But Capo d'Istria, who had been virtual dictator since the battle of Navarino, refused to accept these terms and Leopold also backed out. So a new solution was necessary.

The situation was further complicated by the following events:

- (a) There was a revolution in France in 1830 and Charles X was overthrown.
- (b) Capo d'Istria was assassinated and consequently there was complete anarchy in Greece.
- (c) In England, the Tory government of Wellington fell in November 1830 and the Whigs came to power. Lord Palmerstone became the new Foreign Minister. He was very sympathetic to the cause of the Greeks.

After protracted negotiations another protocol was signed in September 1831, and the following proposals were made:

- (i) Greece should be completely independent.
- (ii) Her frontiers; were extended from the Gulf of Volo in the east to Arta in the west.
- (iii) Prince Otto, second son of. King Louis of Bavaria, was offered the crown.

In May 1832, a formal treaty embodying the' above proposals was signed.

The establishment of an independent Greece was an event of great significance. "It was here that the first successful blow was administered to the autocratic government of Europe by Congress; here that the Ottoman Empire received its most sensible wound; here that the modern spirit of nationalism, afterwards destined to govern Italy and

Poland, Bohemia and Ireland and to bring the Austrian Empire to the ground, won its first romantic and resounding triumph."

Suggested Readings:-

1. Meenakshi Phukan : Rise of Modern West
2. G. Clark : Early Modern Europe
3. Raghubir Dayal : Modern European History
4. Jain and Mathur : World History (1500 – 1950)
5. G.M. Trevelyan : Social History of England
6. Parthsarathi Gupta (ed.) : आधुनिक पश्चिम का उदय
7. लाल बहादुर वर्मा : आधुनिक यूरोप का इतिहास
