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# The Crimean War

Clive Ponting

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# About the Book

The Crimean War is full of resonance – not least, the Charge of the Light Brigade, the Siege of Sevastopol and Florence Nightingale at Scutari with her lamp. In this fascinating book, Clive Ponting separates the myths from the reality, and tells the true story of the heroism of the ordinary soldiers, often through eye-witness accounts of the men who fought and those who survived the terrible winter of 1854–55.

To contemporaries, it was ‘The Great War with Russia’ – fought not only in the Black Sea and the Crimea but in the Baltic, the Arctic, the Pacific and the Caucasus. Ironically, Britain’s allies were France, her traditional enemy, ably commanded (from home) by Napoleon III himself, and the Muslim Ottoman Empire, widely seen as an infidel corrupt power. It was the first of the ‘modern’ wars, using rifles, artillery, trench systems, steam battleships, telegraph and railways; yet the British soldiers wore their old highly coloured uniforms and took part in their last cavalry charge in Europe. There were over 650,000 casualties.

Britain was unable fully to deploy her greatest strength, her Navy, while her Army was led by incompetent aristocrats. The views of ordinary soldiers about Raglan, Cardigan and Lucan make painful reading.

## About the Author

Clive Ponting is a Reader in the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Wales, Swansea. His *Green History of the World* was an international bestseller, and his revisionist biography of Churchill raised a storm of controversy. He is the author of *Armageddon*, an analysis of the Second World War. His books include *The Pimlico History of the Twentieth Century*, *World History: A New Perspective* and *Thirteen Days: The Road to the First World War*, all published by Pimlico.

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# THE CRIMEAN WAR

The Truth Behind the Myth

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CLIVE PONTING



PIMLICO



## Preface

Most British people remember the Crimean War for the heroic disaster of the Charge of the Light Brigade and the selfless devotion of Florence Nightingale. Myths, such as the shipload of left boots, are still widely believed even though they never happened. Britons may also be dimly aware of the war through pub and street names such as Alma and Inkerman and items of clothing such as a balaklava, cardigan and raglan.

The true reasons for the war, who was allied with whom, why it was fought in the Crimea, how it was fought and its outcome are now largely lost in obscurity. The war has become a byword for inefficiency and incompetence (as though these were unique to this war) and it has come to be seen as an historical irrelevance. Now, 150 years after the outbreak of the war, it is time to re-evaluate this war and return it to its place as the most important and devastating conflict fought in the century between 1815 and 1914.

The 'Crimean War' is a misnomer for a conflict which was fought from the Arctic to the Pacific and which affected nearly every state in the world. The allies (Britain and France) did not choose to undertake a siege of Sevastopol in Crimea which lasted for a year - that happened as a result of poor planning, military incompetence and stiff Russian resistance. Britain certainly did not want to fight such a war, because the army it could maintain was about a quarter of the size of the French army and its influence over strategy reflected this disparity. The British had hoped and planned that the Royal Navy would be their chief

weapon and that the main theatre of operations would be in the Baltic. There they hoped to destroy the Russian fleet and possibly even attack and capture St Petersburg.

The 'Crimean War' was not a title known to contemporaries, who for some time after the war ended in 1856 referred to it as the 'Russian War' or 'The Great War with Russia'. It was the only modern war that Britain ever fought against Russia and it demonstrated that it was impossible for either the greatest land power or the greatest sea power in the world to inflict a decisive defeat on the other. The title 'Crimean War' came into general use gradually in the late nineteenth century and was part of the establishment of a consensus about that war that has remained, in many essentials, almost unchanged until the present day.

The war of 1854-56 was rapidly considered to be a mistake that should never be repeated. Britain had fought in alliance with its traditional enemy France to support an infidel Islamic power (the Ottoman empire) which was almost universally considered to be corrupt and condemned to inevitable extinction by the march of progress. (A progress that was exemplified by perceived British superiority to all other powers in morals, economics, technology and politics.) The war was viewed as the outcome of poor diplomacy and the unexpected escalation of a trivial dispute over the minutiae of Christian church politics in Palestine into a quarrel between the great powers of Europe. The Crimean War came to be seen as the outstanding example of why wars should not be fought.

This assessment is wrong. Although the diplomatic quarrel did begin over a religious dispute, it very rapidly became a contest for power and influence in the Ottoman empire that seriously affected the strategic interests of all the major European powers. The diplomacy that led up to the war was clumsy but, in the last resort, the war was

fought because Russia, France and Britain thought their vital interests were at stake.

The results of the Crimean War also seemed to be disappointing. Russia, Britain's main rival for world power in the mid-nineteenth century, was only slightly checked by the war. The peace treaty was certainly not a victors' peace. The British blamed the French for making peace too soon and ignored the fact that they could not have continued the war on their own with any real chance of success. The British, Palmerston in particular, might dream about a harsh peace but, despite their industrial and technological supremacy over the other European powers, they lacked the military and naval force to impose such a settlement. The war remained a limited one and, not surprisingly, the peace treaty reflected its limited nature. Had the war continued into 1856, it might well have expanded into a full-scale European war that would have had incalculable consequences and would certainly have led to a major redrawing of the map of Europe. Such a major conflict did not occur for a number of reasons. Diplomacy still operated during the war and kept war aims limited. Austria, the main 'neutral', was able to act as a bridge between the two sides, and Napoleon III kept a very realistic perspective on what he wanted.

The British decided that they would rather forget the Crimean War because in nearly every respect it was a failure. It had raised a number of very real and potentially damaging questions. It had raised doubts about the competence of the small aristocratic group that provided the leadership of the army, about the ability of the governing political elite and about the efficiency of the British system of government. In the first half of 1855 there were powerful demands for a major restructuring of British institutions. They were contained, but after the war the small governing group in Britain naturally preferred to let these troublesome questions fade away and be forgotten.

They, and others, could return to a comforting complacency about the superiority of the British way of doing things. Military incompetence could be accepted because limited reforms and success in colonial wars against technologically inferior people seemed to show that it would not happen again.

More comforting myths came to dominate the accepted view of the war. The stupidity of the orders that led to the charge of the Light Brigade could be played down ('their's not to reason why') and the blind courage of those involved brought to centre stage ('the noble six hundred'). The other redeeming feature of the war could be the selfless heroism of Florence Nightingale, who was portrayed as the incarnation of Victorian female virtues - the caring 'mother' and healer who struggled against stupidity, but took on a role considered suitable for a woman.

The 'Crimean War' (the title is retained simply because it is now too familiar to change) became the forgotten war. For the British it was an aberration because it was the only time the country was involved in a European war between 1815 and 1914. It was a lesson to be learnt - Britain should steer clear of Europe and concentrate on its imperial glories. In fact that was the wrong lesson to draw. Britain was a European power and it could not ignore what happened on the continent. The Crimean War also showed that Britain could not simply be a maritime power - the Royal Navy helped protect trade and the empire, but it could not make a significant contribution in a European conflict. If Britain wanted to have any real influence over the conduct of such a war it had, whether it liked it or not, to provide a major army. It was a painful lesson that had to be learnt all over again in 1914.

## **Eye-witnesses**

The Crimean War is one of the first major wars for which a substantial number of first-hand accounts have survived. They provide vivid descriptions of the fighting and the conditions in the Crimea and often a surprisingly blunt view of the army leadership. Rather than provide a second-hand, paraphrased account of the war, I decided to include extracts from these accounts throughout the story. They will be found in 'boxes' at appropriate points in the narrative. I have retained the idiosyncratic spelling, grammar, punctuation and capitalisation of the originals. The war is followed through the experiences of a number of men. A very short biographical note on the chief contributors can be found below.

### **William Howard Russell**

He was born in 1820 near Dublin and educated at Trinity College, although he did not graduate. He dabbled in journalism and in 1841 was a correspondent for *The Times* on the elections in Ireland. He read for the Bar, taught mathematics and was also a parliamentary reporter for *The Times* from 1843. He acted as a correspondent in the Schleswig-Holstein wars and was then sent by *The Times* to cover the war in the east.

Although he became famous as the first 'war correspondent', and his despatches were later seen as having a major impact on opinion in Britain about the war, Russell's reports have to be treated with caution. He was,

like most of his contemporaries, anti-Ottoman (the Turks were grubby, cowardly Orientals) and virulently anti-French. From some of his descriptions of the battles it would be hard to believe that the French took any part in them. It is also obvious that he cannot have seen for himself all of the events he purports to describe. The identity of his informants is unknown and their reliability is difficult to assess. Russell was also away from the Crimea during the most crucial time in the dreadful winter of 1854-55. He left on 7 December and spent Christmas at Constantinople living in considerable luxury before returning at the end of the month.

Not surprisingly, his reports reflect the prevailing attitudes of the British upper-middle-class readership of *The Times*. They tell his readership what it wanted to hear about the war. Russell was close to Raglan, whom he rarely criticised, but fell out of favour with Codrington when he became British commander in the autumn of 1855. Russell blamed Codrington for the British failure at the Great Redan during the final attack on Sevastopol. He left the Crimea in early December 1855 and was replaced by the Constantinople correspondent of *The Times*.

After the Crimean War he covered numerous other conflicts - the American Civil War, the Austro-Prussian and the Franco-Prussian Wars - before retiring in 1882. He stood unsuccessfully as a Conservative candidate for Parliament, founded the *Army and Navy Gazette* and was knighted in 1895. He died in 1907.

### **Roger Fenton**

Born in 1819, Fenton came from a manufacturing and banking family and his father was Liberal MP for Rochdale in the 1830s. He studied in London and Paris, where he took up the new technology of photography. He returned to

London in 1844, became a solicitor, but kept up his interest in photography and was a founder of the Photographic Society in 1853.

Fenton was not the first war photographer - that honour probably falls to Karl Baptist von Szathmari of Bucharest, whose photographs of the 1853 Danube campaign were shown at the Universal Exhibition at Paris in 1855. The British army decided to have an official photographer in the east and chose Richard Nicklin of Dickinson & Co. of New Bond Street, who was contracted for six months at six shillings a day plus food, allowances and a free passage. He left in mid-June 1854 for Varna with sixteen cases of equipment. It is uncertain what happened to him, but he probably drowned off Balaklava in the 'Great Storm' of November 1854. The army replaced him with Ensigns Brandon and Dawson, who were given a month's training with the portrait photographer, J. E. Mayall. The two soldiers left in the spring of 1855 and it is known that their photographs still existed, in a poor condition, in the War Office in 1869. They were subsequently destroyed.

Fenton was financed by Thomas Agnew & Sons of Manchester, who wanted to produce an album suitable for sale to a Victorian audience. His photographs are not an accurate record of the war. He was instructed not to record the horrors of war and his photos are therefore carefully constructed images designed to emphasise certain aspects of the conflict that would be agreeable to his audience. The technology available ruled out action photographs - exposure times were very long and scenes therefore had to be static.

Fenton left in mid-February 1855 with his two alcoholic assistants and a specially converted van that he had bought from a Canterbury wine merchant. It was designed as the men's living, cooking and sleeping quarters and also housed five cameras, 700 glass plates and huge amounts of equipment. Fenton arrived at Balaklava on 8 March and

soon found that his letters of introduction from Prince Albert smoothed away the military opposition to his activities. Overall he took nearly 400 usable photographs (the summer heat made processing difficult) before he left after the failure of the allied assault on 18 June. Fenton accompanied the royal visit to Paris in August 1855 and went again the next month to show Napoleon 360 photographs. Nearly all of them were exhibited in London in October and then sold in a limited edition priced at 360 guineas. After the war he continued to work in photography until 1862 when he became a full-time solicitor in London. He died in 1869.

The other eye-witnesses to the war are serving soldiers - their accounts come from either diaries or letters home.

### **Henry Clifford**

Born in 1826, he was the third son of Lord Clifford of Chudleigh. This was a Catholic family and he was educated at Catholic schools and, briefly, the University of Fribourg. He joined the Rifle Brigade in 1846 and served in South Africa before returning to Britain in January 1854. He travelled out to the eastern Mediterranean in July and served as aide-de-camp to Brigadier George Buller, the commander of the 2nd Brigade of the Light Division. In late 1854, after Buller returned to Britain, Clifford worked on the Quartermaster staff of the Light Division. After the Crimea he remained in the army, reaching the rank of Major-General before his death in 1883.

### **George Frederick Dallas**

Born in 1827, he was the fourth son of Captain Robert Dallas. He was educated at Harrow and his family bought



his commission as an Ensign in the 46th South Devonshire, Regiment of Foot that was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Garrett, a friend of Robert Dallas since the Peninsular War. At the age of twenty-one, 'Fred' Dallas bought a commission as a Lieutenant. His regiment did not travel to the Crimea as a single unit because of a series of courts-martial following a number of notorious and well-publicised incidents. Dallas left on 9 August 1854 with Lieutenant-General Sir George Cathcart, the commander of the 4th Division. They reached Varna on 2 September, just in time to sail to the Crimea. Dallas landed at Evpatoriya, but did not take part in the battle of the Alma - his understrength regiment was left behind to clear up the beaches. He was the only 'eye-witness' to serve throughout the Crimean campaign - he was in the last party to leave after peace was signed and he did not arrive back in Britain until 5 August 1856.

After the Crimea Dallas served at Gibraltar and Hong Kong and was in India during the 'mutiny' of 1857, but took no part in the fighting. He went on to half-pay in 1861, married and finally sold his commission in 1876. His children were taught by a then obscure local music teacher, Edward Elgar. Dallas died in 1888.

### **George Palmer Evelyn**

Born in 1823, Evelyn was the son of an army officer who had fought at Waterloo. After education at Cheam School he joined the Rifle Brigade and served in North America and South Africa. He left the army in the early 1850s, but served as an officer in the Royal Surrey Militia. He travelled east in December 1853 as either a freelance reporter or an officer with the Ottoman army (it is impossible to discover which). He left the Danube front (which he found too dull) in March 1854 and returned to

Britain for militia training. He left again for the east in July and briefly visited Varna. In early September he was appointed as a British liaison officer with the Ottoman forces, but appears never to have joined them. After Inkerman he was bored with the prospect of a long siege at Sevastopol and a Crimean winter and left for home on 25 November 1854. He settled down in Surrey, married and continued to serve in the militia. He died in 1889.

### **Temple Godman**

He was born in 1832 into a wealthy Surrey landed family and was educated at Eton. He joined the 5th Dragoon Guards in 1851 as a Cornet - the commission cost £840. He bought his promotion to Lieutenant in March 1854 and to Captain just over a year later. (The latter promotion cost £3,225 - about £150,000 at today's prices.) His regiment left from Cork in late May 1854 and reached Varna in early June. They did not sail with the main convoy to the Crimea, and Godman did not land at Balaklava until 1 October. His regiment formed part of the Heavy Brigade. He left, with most of the rest of the cavalry, in November 1855 to spend the winter at Scutari. When peace was signed he travelled to Jerusalem and Cairo before returning to Britain in late June 1856. After the Crimea he rose to the rank of Colonel by 1876 before retiring in 1882. He died in 1912.

### **George Lawson**

Born in 1831, Lawson was the son of a London wine merchant. He began training as a medical student at King's College in 1848 and qualified in 1852. He volunteered for military service as a doctor in early 1854 and left Woolwich, after brief training, in early March. He stayed at Gallipoli until late June before moving to Varna, where he

contracted typhoid fever in mid-July and was ill until late August. He was nearly invalided home, but did sail to the Crimea. In May 1855 Lawson contracted fever again (probably typhus this time) and sailed home in June, arriving in August. He never fully recovered from these illnesses, but worked as a doctor (specialising in eye treatment) until his death in 1903.

### **George Newman**

He was born in 1828 in Runcorn, but his early life is a mystery. He could speak French and probably learnt the language working as a navy building railways with the many British contractors operating in France. He joined the 23rd Regiment of Foot, Royal Welch Fusiliers at Winchester on 8 February 1849 and sailed for the Crimea on 5 April 1854. At the battle of Inkerman he was part of an isolated detachment under Lieutenant James Duff that was surprised by a group of Russians appearing suddenly out of the mist. Newman and eleven other men were taken prisoner.

He was a prisoner of war for almost a year and was marched from Sevastopol to Simferopol, Perekop, Melitopol and Kharkov to Voronezh, where he arrived in the middle of February 1855. Here he was allowed free access to the town and was well paid teaching English to a Russian lady. He planned to escape but was selected for a prisoner exchange and taken to Odessa in August. Newman rejoined his regiment at the end of October and left the Crimea in mid-June 1856, reaching Portsmouth on 21 July. He left the army on 1 January 1857 just a month before his regiment was due to leave for China. His life after he left the army is unknown. The extraordinary story of his adventures as a prisoner of war was written for his half-brother, William Peerless.

## A Note on Names

The transliteration of Russian names seemed to cause the British and French a number of problems. The most obvious one was the use of Sebastopol instead of Sevastopol, through a misunderstanding of the pronunciation of the Russian 'b'. Other mistakes were much worse, with 'Woronzoff' probably winning the prize - it should be Vorontsov - for there is no 'w' in Russian, the 'z' is the wrong sound and 'ff' should be 'v'. It seems to have been the French who introduced an unnecessary 't' at the beginning of Chernaya and Chorgun and in the middle of Kacha and Kerch. It is Balaklava in Russian, and there is no need to introduce a 'c' instead of the 'k' because the sound is the same. Similarly there is no double 'n' at the end of Inkerman.

I have tried to use the standard method for transcribing Russian (the fact that the Crimea is now in the Ukraine is irrelevant in the context of history) adopted in the 1940s. This does produce some slight oddities - Fedyukhin, Evpatoriya and Bakhchisarai - but is, I hope, consistent. At least there is no argument over one of the crucial battles - it is the 'Alma'. No doubt I have made some mistakes in this difficult area and the experts concerned will surely point them out!

# 1

## **The Reason Why**

THE DISPUTE THAT started the diplomatic slide to the Crimean War began more than six years before the British and French declarations of war on Russia at the end of March 1854. The argument involved the Orthodox, Armenian and Catholic churches disputing control of some of the Christian Holy Places in Palestine. It led to war because of the way the issue was exploited by France and Russia so that eventually the very future of the Ottoman empire was at stake. War could easily have been avoided, but all the powers involved chose, at various times, to escalate the crisis.

### **The Holy Places**

As so often in the history of Christianity, the disputes between the different sects were even more vicious than the Christian quarrels with their monotheistic rivals - Islam and Judaism. In late 1847 the various Christian churches began arguing over the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The Catholics did not hold a set of keys to the main door of the church (only the Orthodox and the Armenians had this privilege) and were, therefore, restricted to the use of an adjoining chapel and entered the church through a side door. The dispute worsened when a silver star with Latin inscriptions went missing. The Catholics suggested, with some justification, that it had been stolen by the Orthodox clergy. They decided to use the

'theft' to raise the wider question of their rights and privileges and appealed to the French government for support.

These arguments were the culmination of an increasing rivalry between the various churches in Palestine. In 1845 the Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem moved his residence to the city from Constantinople, and two years later Pope Pius IX sent the Catholic Patriarch back to the city for the first time since 1291. The French government set up their first diplomatic representative in 1843 following the assertion by the Catholic Church of its right to rebuild the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. As the intra-Christian conflicts escalated, the Ottoman government was forced to move in troops to separate the monks who were fighting around the Holy Sepulchre.

It was not until 1849 that the French government took up the cause of the Catholic clergy. It instructed its Ambassador in Constantinople to demand the 'restoration' of Catholic rights over the Holy Places, which, it argued, were defined in a treaty of 1740 made with the Ottoman government. The French were supported by some of the other Catholic powers of Europe - Portugal, Spain, Sardinia, Naples and Belgium (but not Austria). Belgium added its own demand for the restoration of the tombs of Baldwin and Godfrey (the rulers of the crusader kingdom of Jerusalem in the twelfth century, who came from Flanders). The French demanded that the Catholics should have equal possession of the sanctuary of the Nativity in Bethlehem, that their star should be replaced and they should also be allowed to place a tapestry in the grotto of the church. Second, they should have the right to 'repair' the main cupola of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem so as to restore the building to its pre-1808 condition (which would remove the Orthodox Pantokrator from the dome). Third, they should also have the right to 'restore' the Tomb of the Virgin at Gethsemane. In response to these demands

the Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem asserted his right to repair the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and in making these demands he was supported by the Russian government. The dispute now involved two major European powers each supporting their respective churches (the Russian position was, they argued, supported by a treaty of 1776). The problem was that ultimately the different claims were irreconcilable, as the Russian minister in Constantinople reported to St Petersburg: 'The litigation is as old as it is complicated; no attempt to resolve it has proved successful; the titles are obscure and contradictory.'<sup>1</sup>

The Ottoman government saw little reason to become involved in a petty dispute between 'infidels' as long as it did not threaten their own position. Their main aim was to avoid committing themselves to either side. They played for time and suggested a commission of representatives of the three churches involved, which finally met in Jerusalem on 4 August 1851. Each side argued over the 'rights' supposedly granted in various documents dating back to 1776, 1740, 1686, 1528, 1453 and 636. The commission met until the end of October, when the Ottoman government suspended the talks, which were deadlocked. They decided that the Christians were too intransigent to settle the issue, so they set up their own commission composed of Islamic scholars and in October 1852 attempted to impose a settlement based on the work of these scholars. However, it could not be enforced. The Orthodox clergy refused to hand over the key to the main door of the Church of the Nativity and the Latin star was still missing. The engineer who was to start work on the cupola of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre did not appear and said only that he would consult all three groups before starting work.

By the end of 1852 the obscure dispute over the Holy Places had been rumbling on for five years. There seemed

to be no reason why it should not continue in this way for a long time. Yet within six months Russia had invaded part of the Ottoman empire, and in less than a year the Ottoman empire and Russia were at war. By March 1854 Britain and France had joined that war. The conflict between the various Christian churches helped produce the first war between the major European states for forty years. It did so not because of the intrinsic merits of that argument (if there were any), but because the quarrel was deliberately escalated so that in the end fundamental strategic issues were judged to be at stake. The reasons for the Crimean War therefore have to be sought in the wider European situation.

### **Europe in the mid-nineteenth century**

The somewhat surprising French interest in the position of the Catholic Church in Palestine stemmed from the outcome of the 1848 revolution. The revolution in Paris on 24 February that caused the monarch, Louis-Philippe, to flee to Britain was part of a wave of revolutions across Europe that year. Outside France the revolutionary wave was contained and then suppressed. In Paris a republic was proclaimed the day after Louis-Philippe's departure, but it was rapidly subverted by Louis Napoleon (the probable son of Napoleon Bonaparte's brother - his legitimacy was disputed). He became the Bonapartist heir in 1832 and attempted two badly botched coups in 1836 and 1840. In 1848 he was living in exile in Britain and was unable to take immediate advantage of the revolution. He became a Deputy in September 1848 and in December was elected President. Napoleon had considerable support within the army and in November 1851 he was able to make one of his main backers, Saint Arnaud, Minister for War. This was the prelude to a coup on 2 December when Saint Arnaud was



able to crush resistance in Paris within a couple of days. Napoleon's long-term aim was to restore the empire of his uncle and this was approved by a plebiscite in late November 1852. On 2 December Napoleon was installed as Emperor (taking the title Napoleon III, which emphasised his descent from his uncle) in a ceremony in the Tuileries.

It was Napoleon who directed French policy over the Holy Places from early 1849 and escalated the dispute in order to curry favour with conservative Catholic groups in the period leading up to his coup. The chief reason, however, was diplomatic. Ever since the Congress of Vienna in 1815, France had been constrained by the so-called 'Concert of Europe'. This was a grouping of the conservative autocracies of Russia, Austria and Prussia aimed at maintaining the 1815 settlement and, more important, defeating moves towards liberalism in Europe. It was still operating in 1849 when the Russian army supported the Habsburgs in putting down revolutionary movements in Austria and Hungary and re-establishing Austrian control over its Italian provinces (Lombardy and Venetia). All French governments since 1815 had tried to increase their room for manoeuvre in European diplomacy, but with only limited success. Napoleon did little more than place a greater emphasis on this effort. He realised that the Holy Places dispute could bring diplomatic gains. It would probably increase French influence in the Levant and, by backing the Catholic cause, would also split Catholic Austria and Orthodox Russia and therefore weaken the Concert of conservative powers. As Napoleon III's Foreign Minister told a friend:



**Map 1: Europe in the early 1850s**

The question of the Holy Places and everything affecting them was of no importance whatever to France. All this Eastern Question which provoked so much noise was nothing more for the imperial government than a means of dislocating the continental alliance which had tended to paralyze France for almost half a century.<sup>2</sup>

France was the traditional enemy of Britain, and Napoleon's rise to power rekindled old emotions stemming from the wars of 1793-1815 (some of the British politicians in power in the 1850s were old enough to have served in the governments of that period). Following Napoleon's assumption of the imperial title in late 1852, the new government led by Lord Aberdeen expected war - not with Russia but with France. However, the main threat to Britain's strategic position came from Russia. The result was a contest between the world's greatest sea power and the world's strongest land power. They came into conflict in

a number of regions across the globe ranging from the Arctic (the rivalry over the fur trade between the Hudson's Bay Company and the Russian-American Company, which still controlled Alaska) to the Pacific and from East Asia to the Baltic. However, the key area where the two powers collided was in the Near East. Russia had not yet conquered the Muslim states of Central Asia and so its threat to British control of India was prospective rather than immediate. However, they did clash over Persia, the Gulf, Afghanistan and, most important of all, the future of the Ottoman empire. Russia was the main expansionist power in the area in the late eighteenth century (it secured control of the Crimea in 1783) and in the early nineteenth century (as it slowly took control of the Caucasus region). Any further expansion of Russian power towards Constantinople would threaten British interests in the eastern Mediterranean and a push into Persia would threaten the Gulf area. Both regions were regarded as vital for communications with India.

The Ottoman empire was the dominant power in the Near East - it still stretched from the frontiers of Hungary across all of the Balkans (except for the tiny kingdom of Greece), through Anatolia, the Levant and the Arabian peninsula to the frontiers of Persia. In theory it also controlled the North African coast (apart from Algeria), although in practice the rulers of this area were autonomous.

The so-called 'Eastern Question' remained of little importance in European diplomacy throughout the 1830s and 1840s apart from one significant development. The Straits Convention of 1841 closed the Dardanelles to warships of all states as long as the Ottoman empire was at peace. This not only stopped the Russian fleet from reaching the Mediterranean, but also ensured that Britain and France (the two powers with the strongest fleets in the

Mediterranean) could not threaten Russian control of the Black Sea.

Given the vital strategic position of the Ottoman empire, its internal government was regarded as a fundamental issue for the other European powers. The empire was a multi-national, multi-religious unit that was governed through a high degree of autonomy for local groups and with only limited central government from Constantinople. The key feature was the *millet* system, under which each major religious group collected its own taxes on behalf of the central government and had jurisdiction over civil cases involving its own members. The heads of each of these groups (such as the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople) were responsible to the central administration and their appointment was subject to the veto of the Sultan. At the local, village level (nearly all villages were composed of a single religious group) leaders were elected and formed the local administration. The main religious groups that had their own *millet* were the Orthodox Church (which made up nearly one-third of the population of the empire), the Armenians and the Jews. The Catholics were too small to merit separate status and the minuscule Protestant population was granted a *millet* of its own in 1850 only as a favour to Britain.

The Ottoman empire had begun a major process of reform and modernisation in the 1820s and this had produced an effective army equipped with modern weapons. However, administrative reform was, potentially, extremely destabilising. Increasing centralisation threatened the power of local groups that had governed the empire for more than 400 years. Abolition of the *millet* system (which would produce a common citizenship) threatened Muslim supremacy within the empire. Britain tended to favour modernisation and the abolition of the *millet* system because it had nothing to gain from the latter.

Russia, however, tried to exploit the existing *millet* system to its own advantage by supporting the Orthodox Church.

Russia was by far the largest of the European states and had been expanding westwards since the time of Peter the Great in the early eighteenth century. However, it was economically backward and a large proportion of its people were serfs owned by either the landowners or the state. Its government was an autocracy and policy was decided by Tsar Nicholas I, who had taken the throne in 1825 and savagely suppressed a military revolt aimed at liberalising some elements of the Russian state. Nicholas was a strong believer in autocracy, yet was easily swayed by his advisers who were old and mainly from a military background. The exception was the Foreign Minister Count Nesselrode who held the post from the late 1820s. He was a Baltic German who never spoke Russian correctly and was, remarkably, a member of the Anglican Church. Since 1829 he had advocated a policy of allowing a weakened Ottoman empire to survive so that a strong state did not threaten Russia's southern frontier.

Russia was in a poor condition by the late 1840s. It was continually threatened by peasant revolts and by nationalist uprisings in areas such as Poland and the Caucasus. The arbitrary system of government was only just able to keep control, and increasingly draconian censorship had been imposed from 1846 in an attempt to keep out ideas that might threaten its fragile stability. Most of Nicholas's advisers were out of touch with reality and still believed that Russia was a strong, prosperous state that could dominate Europe.

### **Russia creates a crisis**

In late 1852 Russia escalated the Holy Places dispute, which had been rumbling along for five years. It did so for a

number of reasons. First, the Ottoman decision in late November to grant the keys of the Bethlehem church to the Catholics seemed to favour France. Second, a revolt began in Montenegro following the imposition of an Ottoman governor as a replacement for the local ruler. Russia saw itself as the protector of the Orthodox population in these circumstances. Third, Napoleon's proclamation of the Second Empire and his assumption of the title Napoleon III at the beginning of December seemed a direct threat to the monarchical principle. The other European powers soon accommodated themselves to the new reality, but Nicholas was less willing to do so. Fourth, and perhaps most important, a despatch was sent from Constantinople by the Ambassador, Ozerov, on 13 December. This enclosed an appeal for support from the Orthodox Patriarch in Constantinople couched in emotional terms that suggested the end of the Church was nigh. Ozerov backed up this appeal by suggesting that a much stronger Russian policy was now necessary.

Russian policy was decided in the first days of 1853. Nesselrode argued for a continuation of his cautious policy. He did, however, go along with Nicholas's suggestion that a special envoy should be sent to Constantinople in an attempt to browbeat the Ottoman government into accepting Russian terms over the Holy Places dispute. Prince A. S. Menshikov, who had been a governor of Finland and Minister of the Navy since 1830, was selected for the role. He was a poor choice for a crucial diplomatic mission - apart from being old and ill, he was arrogant and extremely tactless. Nicholas also decided that Menshikov's mission was to be backed up by the threat of force. Two army corps were to be secretly mobilised and plans made to move them rapidly from Odessa and Sevastopol so as to capture Constantinople before the British and French could react. (In practice the Russian military could not carry out