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Russia as an Expansionist Empire in the Opinions of the British Press 1855–1878

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Abstract:

The article aims to analyze the opinions of British newspapers about Russia and its foreign policy – precisely the Eastern Question between 1855 and 1878. The research was based on the editorial articles published on the pages of the most influential London dailies. The Crimean war of 1855 and the war scare of 1878 confirmed the already existing negative stereotypes of Russia as the aggressive and barbarian power able to threaten the British interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. The press was divided along party lines yet the general picture was similar despite its liberal or conservative affiliations. The factor determining the ultimate attitude of the press towards Russia was the security of British possession.



The two powers on the opposite ends of Europe were hardly on friendly terms in the second part of the 19th century. Despite the fact that Russia was a land power and Britain maritime, their rivalry was apparent. Hostility between these distant empires can be traced back to the 18th century, when the Oczakov debate showed the enlargement of the diplomatic horizons of Great Britain.¹ The next century began with British-Russian cooperation in the fight against Napoleonic France. However, this was a short-lived reconciliation. Regardless of significant trade, political hostility between the two countries slowly grew.

¹ Oczakov – fort on the Black Sea captured in December 1788 by Russia. Britain felt that it would alter the balance of power, Matthew Smith Anderson, *Britain's Discovery of Russia, 1553–1815* (London: Macmillan, 1958), 143–185; Allan Cunningham, “The Oczakov Debate,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 1/3 (1965): 209–237, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4282115>.

It is interesting that Russia's activity in the Baltic Sea region did not make the British feel threatened. The feeling of strength associated with having a powerful fleet made it possible to disregard the tsarist state's interest in this region.

One of the territories where the activity of the great powers led to conflict was eastern Mediterranean. The Eastern Question, "one of the great diplomatic preoccupations of the 19th century," was a field of conflict between two powers.² The concept of the Eastern Question meant an international problem caused by the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the liberation movements of its nations and the struggle between the great powers to exercise influence over Turkey. For the British in the 19th century, Russia posed a threat to a weakening Ottoman state. London's political goal was to support Turkey in conflicts with the tsarist empire. Such a policy led to the Crimean war of 1853 and to a war scare in 1878.

It is interesting to analyse the British press and its attitude towards Russia during those inflammatory moments between the two powers. The number of newspapers in Britain in the 19th century was growing rapidly. They were cheaper than books and printed in large numbers and thus easy accessible. The majority of the newspaper readers were in the urban middle classes.³

The British press of the second half of the 19th century shows how certain anti-Russian stereotypes were formed, which in turn promoted aversion to Russia among the British public. The Romanov state was presented in the newspapers as a reactionary power with insatiable territorial ambitions that threatened the politics of Great Britain.⁴

² Gerald David Clayton, *Britain and the Eastern Question – Missolonghi To Gallipoli* (London: University of London Press, 1971), 9. See also: Matthew Smith Anderson, *The Eastern Question. 1774–1923. A Study in International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1966); Barbara Jelavich, *Russia's Balkan Entanglements, 1806–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Also from the Russian side *Восточный вопрос во внешней политике России. Конец XVIII – начало XX в.*, ed. Нина Степановна Киняпина (Москва: Наука, 1978). See also the Eastern Question presented against a broader background: David Gillard, *The Struggle for Asia: 1828–1914. A Study in British and Russian Imperialism* (London: Methuen, 1977).

³ The *Daily News* reached 150,000 copies, and the *Daily Telegraph* 200,000 at the beginning of the 1870s. For exact detail see: Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957). The history of the British press has an extensive bibliography. Worth mentioning: Jeremy Black, *The English Press: A History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019); George Boyce, James Curran, Pauline Wingate, *Newspaper History from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (London: Constable, 1978); Harold Herd, *The March of Journalism: The Story of the British Press from 1622 to the Present Day* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1952); Aled Jones, *Powers of the Press: Newspapers, Power and the Public in Nineteenth-Century England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1996).

⁴ There are several articles dealing with the problem of British press opinion towards Russia mainly concerning Polish problem of the January Uprising of 1863 and the Eastern question. See: John F. Kutolowski, "Mid-Victorian Public Opinion, Polish Propaganda, and the Uprising of 1863," *The Journal of British Studies* 8/2 (May 1969): 86–110; Robert Frank Leslie, "Opinia brytyjska a powstanie styczniowe," *Przegląd Historyczny* 2 (1963): 206–223; Werner Eugen Mosse, "England

Knowledge about that far-away country was very weak and not built on facts. British visitors to Russia in the 19th century were few and far between. None of the newspapers had a permanent correspondent there. The sources of information about Russia were quite often Reuter's telegrams, Russian newspapers and official proclamations which were read by correspondents in Berlin or Vienna. Important political events such as the Russian war with Turkey, territorial expansion in Central Asia or celebrations of the tsar's family occasions – coronations or weddings – drew British correspondents to St. Petersburg and Moscow.

The Crimean War, which took place in 1853–1856, was one of the many stages in the development of the Eastern question.⁵ It was the culmination of a long period of resentment in Great Britain towards Russia and had a strong influence on London's foreign policy in the following years.

The Russophobic public opinion in the 1850s corresponded perfectly to the war-time mood of some members of the Cabinet. Despite the fact that Prime Minister Lord Aberdeen was peacefully minded, he was unable to outweigh the influence of militant Lord Palmerston.⁶ The war against Russia was won by a coalition of Britain, France, Sardinia and Turkey, albeit at very high cost.

The British press blamed Russia and especially Tsar Nicholas I for this international armed conflict. His death on 2 March 1855 was treated as a first sign that peace was possible. *The Times* openly expressed fairly common opinions when it wrote about the relief felt after the death of Nicholas.⁷ The tsar and his politics were assessed very critically on the pages of the British press. It was emphasised that it was his “wicked ambition” that led to the war.⁸

The opinions presented by the British press treated the war as a consequence of the personal actions of Tsar Nicholas, and at the same time as a traditional policy of the Romanov dynasty. The comments emphasised the despotic nature of the tsarist rule and the aggressive aspirations of his predecessors. Tsar Nicholas

and the Polish Insurrection of 1863,” *English Historical Review* 71 (Jan 1956): 28–55; Kazimierz Pasieka, “British Press and the 1863 Polish Insurrection,” *Slavonic and East European Review* 42 (Dec 1963): 15–37; Werner Eugen Mosse, “The End of Crimean System: England, Russia and the Neutrality of the Black Sea, 1870–1,” *The Historical Journal* 4 (1961): 164–190; *idem*, “Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: The British Public and the War-Scare of November 1870,” *The Historical Journal* 1 (1963): 38–58.

⁵ The subject of the Crimean War has an extensive literature. See: David M. Goldfrank, *Origins of the Crimean War* (London: Routledge, 1994); Winfried Baumgart, *The Crimean War 1853–1856* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020); Robert B. Edgerton, *Death or Glory. The Legacy of the Crimean War* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999); still valuable is Zayonchkovsky's work published in 1908–1913, which was re-published in St. Petersburg, see: Андрей Медардович Зайончковский, *Восточная война 1853–1856* (Санкт Петербург: Полигон, 2002). Also worth looking at is Tarle's book: Евре-ний Викторович Тарле, *Крымская война* (Москва: Издательство Юрайт, 2021).

⁶ See: Kingsley Martin, *The Triumph of Lord Palmerston: A Study of Public Opinion in England before the Crimean War* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1924).

⁷ *The Times*, 3 I 1855.

⁸ *Standard*, 3 I 1855.

personally represented everything that was the worst in Russia, the “barbarism of the North,” contrasted by the press with civilisation and the progress of Western Europe.⁹ The accusation of barbarism and lack of civilisation in Russia were repeated on the pages of British newspapers and journals through the whole of the 19th century.

There was no doubt in Britain that the war would end in victory. It was repeated over and over again on the pages of the newspapers. The future peace was perceived as a great victory for the coalition partners over reactionary power – a victory that English newspapers described as “removal [...] of a dangerous obstruction to the political and intellectual progress of the future” of Europe.¹⁰ Defeating a country that trampled on freedom and tried to stop the development of liberal ideas throughout Europe was to be a great moral success.

The peace treaty signed in Paris on 30 March 1856 punished Russia severely. The demilitarisation of the Black Sea and the prohibition of maintaining fortifications on its shores were a severe blow to Russian security in the south.¹¹ The Russian Empire also lost southern Bessarabia to the Danubian Principalities and had to return the fortress of Kars to Turkey. The Black Sea clauses of the Paris Treaty were a “humiliation” for St. Petersburg, and their revocation became a priority of tsarist foreign policy for the next fifteen years.¹²

The British press hoped that the peace would last. They also believed that Russia would keep the treaty provisions and abstain from an aggressive foreign policy. There were expectations that with the new tsar, Alexander II, Russia would enter a new era of development. Instead of conquests Russia would develop industry, agriculture and trade in the manner of all civilised countries. The gained wealth would thus extinguish “the warlike instincts of a semi-barbarian race”.¹³ This quotation was typical for Victorian times when it was believed that material progress was connected with moral improvement.

For Russia, the Eastern Question was paramount. The removal of the restrictions from Black Sea clauses was of utmost importance to the tsarist state. Russia also had a navy in the Baltic, but the distance meant that the south of the country was completely exposed to possible attack by any enemy. The Eastern Question was present in Russian diplomatic activities but the reports of it did not get into the pages of the English press. It seemed that the situation in the Black Sea region was stable.

⁹ *Morning Post*, 3 I 1855.

¹⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, 21 I 1856.

¹¹ A.J.P. Taylor argued that such strict conditions would not have been imposed on a state considered wholly European, Alan John Percivale Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 85.

¹² Goldfrank, *Origins*, 292. On the paradigms in Russia’s foreign policy after the Crimean War see: William C. Fuller Jr., *Strategy and Power in Russia, 1600–1914* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 67–270.

¹³ *The Times*, 11 V 1856.

The defeat of France in the 1870 Franco – Prussian war prompted Russia to openly refute the Black Sea clauses of the Paris Treaty. The note unilaterally rejecting them was delivered to the British on the 9 November 1870. Russia's reopening of the Eastern Question caused public outcry in Great Britain. The prevailing feeling of hostility was expressed by the title of the article in the *Globe* – “Russian aggression”.¹⁴

Most of the newspapers agreed with *The Times* and its expression of fears that Russia's actions meant a resumption of a militarily active policy in the Black Sea basin and the return of so called “old territorial ambitions,” that is, the aggressive policy towards Turkey.¹⁵ Immediately the spirit of a previous tsar was evoked. According to the *Standard*, the empire of Alexander II resembled the Russian state of Nicholas I, “arrogant, unscrupulous, and overbearing”.¹⁶

The unilateral termination of inconvenient clauses by Russia was contrary to the British understanding of the importance of international treaties. Thus Russians were accused of being barbarians or at best semi-civilised. The press argued that Russia had different customs and did not understand the rules governing the civilised world. It was believed that the tsarist state, as a semi-savage country, did not understand the law but only knew to apply brute force. They violated the fundamental principle of all treaties, the principle at “the root of all Christian civilisation,” that is, absolute fidelity to the word and the agreement signed.¹⁷ In this spirit, the *Daily News* asked whether the great “semi-Asian power which occupies Eastern Europe really belongs to our international system [...] of Christian and civilised nations”.¹⁸ The *Illustrated London News* commented very politely but firmly: “We do not write with a wish to offend; but it is hardly possible to avoid remarking that it is only from a nation inheriting such political traditions as those which Russia boasts that we could expect to receive such treatment as that which she menaces”.¹⁹

Since the beginning of Alexander II's rule in 1855, the British press believed that Russia would develop her internal resources and change into a European power. The opening of the Eastern Question challenged the British belief in “the enlightening power of civilisation”.²⁰ A *Daily Telegraph* columnist briefly summed up his reflections on the subject: the Russian circular note was in fact “a call from civilisation to barbarism”.²¹

There was an additional reason for the agitation of the English press. It was due to the conviction that Russia, through its actions, was showing disregard for the superpower position of England. Great Britain was a country aware of its

¹⁴ *Globe*, 14 I 1870.

¹⁵ *The Times*, 14 I 1870; *Standard*, 15 I 1870; *Morning Post*, 15 I 1870.

¹⁶ *Standard*, 17 I 1870.

¹⁷ *Morning Post*, 22 I 1870.

¹⁸ *Daily News*, 18 I 1870.

¹⁹ *Illustrated London News*, 26 I 1870.

²⁰ *Globe*, 28 I 1870.

²¹ *Daily Telegraph*, 18 I 1870.

economic and political importance. The leader of industrial development, a country with very extensive trade contacts, having a powerful overseas empire, expected to be consulted, not just informed. "England cannot afford to be treated as though she had no longer a voice in European affairs" thundered the essentially peaceful *Daily News*.²² Russian policy was a "deliberate and intended affront to England and an attack on English Imperial rights," wrote the *Standard* at the same time.²³

The press started to discuss the possibilities of war. With it came threats and warnings about the power of Britain. It was not only aimed to convince the public of the necessity of war, but rather to warn St. Petersburg and force it to modify its actions. As the *Daily News* wrote, "we prefer to appeal less to the caution and prudence of Russian statesmanship than to its sense of honour".²⁴

British diplomacy was not ready to lead the country to another war with Russia. Despite demonstrating willingness to fight, Britain was satisfied with the agreement that led to the London Conference, which began on 17 January 1871. It was attended by Russia, Turkey, Germany, Austria-Hungary, France, Italy and Great Britain. The press was not completely satisfied with the idea of a conference. The lack of preconditions that Russia would have to fulfil was badly received and was called "capitulation".²⁵ However, the press stopped attacking Russia while waiting for the outcome of the conference.

After long deliberation where the final protocol was rewritten 14 times, an agreement was reached at the conference.²⁶ Formally, it was a British success, because Russia was forced to present its case at the conference. The real winner of the diplomatic conflict, however, was Russia, which did not revoke its note and still obtained the cancellation of the Black Sea clauses.²⁷

The press tried to present the lack of diplomatic success in a different light. *The Times* stated that the signing of the protocol could be understood as if the tsarist state indirectly expressed criticism of its own actions.²⁸ The general tone of the London newspapers was similar. They tried to convince the readers that the very fact of convening an international conference in London was a success.²⁹ There was also a faint belief that Russia could no longer withdraw from the decision once made. The British people should be pleased: unnecessary war has been avoided by behaving with the dignity of a great power.

²² *Daily News*, 19 I 1870.

²³ *Standard*, 26 I 1870.

²⁴ *Daily News*, 26 I 1870.

²⁵ *Standard*, 2 I 1870.

²⁶ Robert William Seton-Watson, *Britain in Europe 1789–1914* (Cambridge: University Press, 1945), 501.

²⁷ This is the prevailing opinion of Soviet and Russian historians. See: Нина Степановна Киняпина, *Внешняя политика России второй половины XIX века* (Москва: Высшая школа, 1974), 114–115. Anderson calls the success of Russia "an empty one," Anderson, *The Eastern Question*, 173.

²⁸ *The Times*, 17 I 1871.

²⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 14 I 1871; *Morning Post*, 14 I 1871; *The Daily News*, 14 I 1871; *Daily News*, 15 I 1871.

The problem of the Eastern Question was not solved with the signing of the London Protocol. The Ottoman state was slowly but constantly losing strength during the 19th century. The Balkan possessions of Turkey were poorly managed and overexploited, and as such were a dangerous source of irredentism. The problem of the difficult situation of various national and religious groups in the European possessions of the Sublime Porte was worsened by a very severe financial crisis of the state.³⁰

After the anti-Turkish uprising in Herzegovina, and later in Bosnia in the summer of 1875, the situation in the Balkans became complicated. In 1876, Serbia and Montenegro began helping the insurgents who had declared war on Turkey. In April 1876, there was an uprising in Bulgaria, which was brutally suppressed by irregular units of the Ottoman army.³¹ After the failure of diplomacy, Russia entered the war against Turkey (1877–1878) as an ally of Southern Slavs.

On 30 April 1887 Britain declared neutrality but in May, as a warning to Russia, defined the limits of British interests. The priority was to maintain free lines of communication between Europe and Asia via the Suez Canal, and consequently, Egypt and the Persian Gulf would have to remain free from Russian influence. The British government also warned that Russia's seizure of Constantinople and the straits would be a violation of British interests.³²

Most London newspapers believed that the real threat was coming from the very ambitious tsarist state, and that the aspirations of the Balkan peoples were deliberately inflamed by St. Petersburg's diplomacy. The Turkish atrocities made some British newspapers aware of the fact that Turkish misgovernment was not a Russian invention. The discussion in the press during the summer of 1876 led to deep divisions between for pro- and anti-Turkish papers.

The Times publicly acknowledged that Russia might really be concerned for the well-being of the Balkan Slavs. The daily suggested that Britain should have taken Russia's place as a defender of the Balkan nations, which would have stopped the expansion of the political influence of the tsarist state.³³

³⁰ For more on the economic state of Turkey see: *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300–1914*, eds. Halil Inalcik, Donald Quataert (Cambridge: University Press, 1994); Christopher Clay, *Gold for the Sultan. Western Bankers and Ottoman Finance 1856–1881* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000); Edhem Eldem, "Ottoman Financial Integration with Europe: Foreign Loans, the Ottoman Bank and the Ottoman Public Debt," *European Review* 13, issue 3: 435.

³¹ Interesting analysis of negative Orientalist stereotypes formed in Britain after the news about "Bulgarian horrors" see: Nazan Çiçek, "Bulgarian Horrors' Revisited: the Many-Layered Manifestations of the Orientalist Discourse in Victorian Political Construction of the External, Intimate and Internal Other," *Bellesten* 81 (2017): 525–568, <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/ttkbelleten/issue/52444/687921>, accessed on 6 I 2022. The previous count of the number of victims (from 12,000 to 30,000), has been questioned recently, Richard Millman, "The Bulgarian Massacres Reconsidered," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 58/2 (April 1980): 23.

³² Seton-Watson, *Britain in Europe*, 524–525.

³³ *The Times*, 8 I 1876.

Other London newspapers were more eager to criticise Russia than Turkey. Some of them, like the *Morning Post* and the *Standard*, did not believe in the full truth of the stories, attributing them to the Russian embassy in Constantinople. The *Standard* downplayed the massacres explaining that atrocities are always part of a civil war, especially in “semi-civilised” groups.³⁴ The *Daily Telegraph* was very critical of those who attacked Turkey, claiming that they were too emotional. “Enthusiastic philanthropists, popular agitators, busybodies, unemployed clergymen [...] and liberals of advanced types [...] insisted upon mixing “Bulgarian atrocities” with the great and complex questions of Eastern policy,” complained the daily.³⁵

Yet with the development of the hostilities between Turkey and Russia and their inability to come to agreement, British newspapers started to strongly distrust the tsar’s empire. *The Times* continued to be critical of Turkey for “hopeless misrule, by the periodical massacres of her Christian subjects [...] and by the horrors of Bulgaria’.³⁶ Russia did not really understand Europe’s aspirations for peace and its real motives were suspicious. The priorities of English politics were clearly outlined by the *Times* – despite the critical attitude towards Turkey, “we do not intend to destroy the imperial framework of Ottoman authority” which elucidated the most important postulate: “We cannot lose sight of the high road to Constantinople’.³⁷

The *Daily Telegraph*, which was always anti-Russian, stated that Russia was “the one and only power which [...] gives us some reason for suspicion.”³⁸ The newspaper suspected that the tsarist state had ulterior political motives in weakening Turkey and was not really interested in “the safety and happiness for the suffering Christians.”³⁹

The *Morning Post* perceived Russia as a cynical power which only formally was defending the Balkan nations. Religious freedom was not a value appreciated by the tsarist empire as the case of Polish Catholics oppressed “with defiance of treaties and natural justice” was proving.⁴⁰ The *Morning Post* suspected that Russia had “criminal ambition” by which the newspaper understood the occupation of Constantinople.⁴¹

The *Daily News* was the only major London newspaper which, in order to defend the Balkan Slaves from Turkish misrule, proposed an Anglo-Russian alliance. Being anti-Turkish did not mean unreservedly supporting Russia. The *Daily News* believed that Russia had to be controlled, otherwise, it could go down “the path of solitary and violent interference’.⁴²

³⁴ *Standard*, 18 I 1876.

³⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, 7 X 1876.

³⁶ *The Times*, 2 X 1876.

³⁷ *The Times*, 3 X 1876.

³⁸ *Daily Telegraph*, 11 X 1876.

³⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 4 X 1876.

⁴⁰ *Morning Post*, 11 X 1876.

⁴¹ *Morning Post*, 20 X 1876.

⁴² *Daily News*, 6 X 1876.

An interesting letter published in the *Times* in January 1877 expressed the opinions found in most of the London papers. According to the author of the letter, most of the English people felt resentment towards the Turks after their actions in the Balkans. This aversion, however, was subdued by a much stronger “apprehension of Russia”.⁴³ Until the outbreak of the war, however, most newspapers hoped for a peaceful solution to the problem.

Russia’s declaration of war was not unexpected by the British press, yet there was no uniform reaction. *The Times* reacted very cautiously – it blamed both sides for inflaming religious fanaticism. The “philanthropy” proclaimed by Russia, the daily claimed, had always been mixed with “political ambitions”.⁴⁴ *The Times* insisted that Britain must remain neutral in the conflict.

Not all newspapers stayed calm. For the *Daily Telegraph*, the very declaration of war was a confirmation of the worst suspicions against Russia. The country of the tsars was called an “aggressor,” for it had attacked the territory of a state in the midst of reforms.⁴⁵ The newspaper was sure that the real goal of Russia was to gain new, long-coveted territories and to expand the sphere of despotic rule. The *Daily Telegraph* rather dramatically proclaimed that “on the desecrated altar of religion, the least civilised nation in Europe kindles the torch of warfare”.⁴⁶

The *Standard* expressed very similar opinions at the beginning of the conflict. The Ottoman empire which wanted to reform itself had been attacked by Russia. The Romanov Empire was, in the opinion of the *Standard*, the main culprit of the crisis situation, because it hid its aggressive aspirations under the mask of philanthropy. “Russia seems to imagine that diplomacy is the art of duping,” the daily wrote, but Britain was not easily deceived.⁴⁷ The *Standard* was quite aggressive in defending The Porte and accusing Russia of the “arrogant fanaticism of the Slavs”.⁴⁸

The most hostile to Russia and friendliest to Turkey was the *Morning Post*. The newspaper praised Turkish rule. Despite the rapes and murders, the Ottomans were still “a great people with a great history.” The “heroic” Turks were contrasted with false and deceptive Russians.⁴⁹ With a strong dislike of the tsarist empire, The *Morning Post* treated promises of Turkish reforms as an already-existing reality, presenting the war as a struggle between a constitutional state and a despotic one.⁵⁰ The war was also an attack on British interests because it could threaten the passage to the East that was the Suez Canal, a main transport artery to India. On the other hand, according

⁴³ *The Times*, 22 I 1877.

⁴⁴ *The Times*, 25 V 1877.

⁴⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, 24 V 1877.

⁴⁶ *Daily Telegraph*, 25 V 1877.

⁴⁷ *Standard*, 11 V 1877.

⁴⁸ *Standard*, 12 V 1877.

⁴⁹ *Morning Post*, 12 V 1877.

⁵⁰ *Morning Post*, 24 V 1877.

to the *Daily News* it was the Ottoman Porte's resistance to "real" reforms that forced tsar Alexander II of Russia to start the war.⁵¹

The conflict was discussed extensively on the pages of London dailies. Reports from the battlefield and analyses of the British government's diplomatic activities were a regular feature on the pages of the newspapers. The war was unique in terms of the amount of information from the front.⁵²

During the war, the anti-Russian attitudes of the British press grew stronger. Many newspapers worried about the violations of vaguely formulated "British interests." *The Times* however was not alarmist. The main point in any discussions about the war was that there was nothing to fear from Russia. She was not strong enough to attack British India.⁵³ Britain should not intervene in the war despite its wide interests in the Mediterranean. The Eastern Question must be left to resolve itself.

The composure of *The Times* contrasted with the strongly anti-Russian rhetoric of the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Morning Post*. The two staunchly anti-Russian newspapers were loudly proclaiming possible threats from St. Petersburg.⁵⁴ Russia may not intend to attack now, the *Daily Telegraph* wrote, but it does not mean that it is impossible in the future. The Tsarist Empire can have a negative impact on British possessions at any time of crisis. Its mere presence near any British colony and its constant march south was disturbing.⁵⁵

The expected approach of Russian troops to Constantinople in the near future started to worry even the British government. It was thus decided in the summer 1877 that a fleet should be sent to Besik Bay and the British garrison in Malta be reinforced. This provoked numerous discussions in the press.

On one side, *The Times* feared that the presence of the fleet would create a false belief among the Turks about the possibility of British help. On the other side, it cautiously mentioned that British interests could be seriously threatened if the Russians decided to "occupy or besiege" Constantinople.⁵⁶ The other London dailies in most cases wholeheartedly supported the decision to send a fleet. The *Pall Mall Gazette* called this "a wise and necessary measure of precaution."⁵⁷ The *Standard* and the *Morning Post* reminded the readers that the purpose of the British fleet in the Mediterranean was to "represent our (British) honour" and "protect British interests."⁵⁸

⁵¹ *The Daily News*, 12 V 1877.

⁵² "The Russo-Turkish War was the object of serious contemporary scrutiny. The number of foreigners accompanying the troops in the field far outnumbered that of previous Wars," Maureen P. O'Connor, "The Vision of Soldiers: Britain, France, Germany and the United States Observe the Russo-Turkish War," *War in History* 4/3 (July 1997): 264.

⁵³ *The Times*, 21 X 1877

⁵⁴ *Daily Telegraph*, 12 I 1877; *Morning Post*, 12 I 1877.

⁵⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, 12 I 1877.

⁵⁶ *The Times*, 4 I 1877; 7 I 1877; 23 I 1877.

⁵⁷ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 4 I 1877.

⁵⁸ *Standard*, 3 I 1877; *Morning Post*, 3 I 1877.

The *Daily Telegraph* presented a dark vision of the future in which Russian forces would enter Constantinople and then “Asia, from Skutari to Calcutta and Peking, will regard the Northern Power as dictatress of the Eastern World”.⁵⁹

The only anti-Turkish newspaper, the *Daily News*, saw danger in such an armed demonstration. It seemed close to an open declaration of war. According to the daily, “no British interest is imperilled” and there was no reason to interfere in any way in the dispute between Russia and Turkey.⁶⁰

The capitulation of Plevna on 10 December 1877, after five months of siege, opened the road to the Ottoman capital. The tension in British-Russian relations was reflected in the press comments.

The Times, composed as usual, advised Turkey to ask for peace, suggesting Britain as a mediator. The newspaper believed that further fighting endangered Ottoman possessions in Europe. Similar comments were presented by the *Globe*.⁶¹

A large group of anti-Russian newspapers reacted to the news with very strong hostility towards the empire of the tsars.⁶² Many London dailies, such as the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Morning Post*, the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Globe*, called for decisive action to be taken by threatening Russia with war. The *Morning Post*, which, after extolling the courage and heroism of the Turkish defenders of Plevna, stated: “The hour has struck when, for the faith of treaties, for British interests, and for English honour, we must be ready to take part in the great conflict which is to determine the future of our Empire”.⁶³ Russia seemed to be the most important enemy of England, and its despotism was the source of all problems in European foreign policy.

In reality, the press did not want Britain to take part in the war. The aim was to convince Russia that London is ready to intervene if the political situation would require it. Britain would be ready to defend its interests by force. “Russia gave this country reasons for war” wrote the *Standard* in February 1878, but the government would not allow itself to be “drawn” into the conflict. “The patience of this country is not yet quite exhausted” declared the daily, pointing out that the calls for war were not entirely sincere.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 18 I 1877.

⁶⁰ *Daily News*, 4 I 1877.

⁶¹ *The Times*, 11 I 1877; *Globe*, 11 I 1877.

⁶² The anti-Russian sentiment of the London street was evidenced by the popularity of the song from the music hall expressing pro-war sentiments: “We do not want to fight, but if we are, we have ships, we have people, we have money too. We fought the bear before. And as long as the British are themselves, the Russians will not have Constantinople,” Roman Golicz, “‘The Russians Shall Not Have Constantinople’: Roman Golicz Looks at English Attitudes to Russia during the Eastern Crisis of 1870–78,” *History Today* 53/9 (September 2003): 39.

⁶³ *Morning Post*, 11 I 1877.

⁶⁴ *Standard*, 11 I 1878.

On the 3 March 1878, in San Stefano, Russia and the Porte signed a peace treaty. According to the conditions, Montenegro, Serbia and Romania gained independence. Russia was to receive southern Bessarabia from Romania, and Armenia from Turkey. The most controversial point was the creation of Bulgaria as an autonomous principality with very generously defined borders. In the south, they extended to the Aegean Sea, and in the west they reached Macedonia and Albania.⁶⁵

Signing the peace of San Stefano increased the hostility of the British press. They were concerned about the expansion of Russian influence in the Balkans and the possible weakness of Turkey. Russia's determination to settle new borders on its own, without the participation of other powers, seemed an inappropriate and even hostile act.⁶⁶

The Times stated that the tsarist state did not have any special laws that would allow it to arbitrarily shape the borders in any part of the continent. The new Balkan borders established in San Stefano were being questioned not only by England, but also by Austria and Greece. According to *The Times*, Russia went to war for the Slaves and should not build itself a power base there at the expense of Turkey. It was obvious that the newspaper was perceiving Russia as an aggressive power threatening British interests. During the discussion on the treaty, *The Times* presented a list of territories that were strategically important for London. These were Egypt, the Persian Gulf, and Constantinople with the Black Sea straits. The Baltic was not on the list. British interests were related to Asian trade and possessions rather than provincial Northern Europe. *The Times* stressed that the Peace of San Stefano violated the status quo in these points.⁶⁷

Other London newspapers were in agreement with *The Times*. The *Daily Telegraph*, the *Standard* and even the *Daily News* were against the treaty, calling for an international congress to provide an ultimate solution to the Eastern Question.⁶⁸

The *Standard* accused Russia of disdaining existing international law. "The sanctity of treaties must disappear for us if others tear them to pieces, and plunder is treated as part of the new public law in Europe," wrote the daily. For the newspaper Russian action it was a symptom of the "principles of barbarism" introduced in Europe by Moscow.⁶⁹

The signing of the Treaty of San Stefano deepened the crisis in British-Russian relations. London felt threatened by tsarist expansion. On 27 March 1878, the cabinet,

⁶⁵ Seton-Watson, *Britain*, 532–533.

⁶⁶ The attitude of the press was noticed by the ambassador in London Pyotr Andreyevich Shuvalov, who wrote in March 1878 to Russian Chancellor Alexander Mikhailovich Gorchakov about hostile public opinion, which is "led by the anti-Russian press," Robert William Seton-Watson, *Disraeli, Gladstone, and the Eastern question; a study in diplomacy and party politics* (London: Mac-Millan, 1935), 339.

⁶⁷ *The Times*, 4 I 1878; 11 I 1878.

⁶⁸ *Daily Telegraph*, 7 I 1878; 10 I 1878; *Standard*, 4 I 1878; *Daily News*, 7 I 1878; 6 V 1878.

⁶⁹ *Standard*, 4 I 1878.

at the request of the Prime Minister, decided to bring seven thousand Indian troops to the Black Sea region. It was a demonstration aiming at obtaining the “best bargaining position” for the discussion on the peace treaty.⁷⁰

In fact, Britain was not ready to start a new war. Without allies and a large standing army, it would have been impossible to attack Russia.⁷¹ But it was not only the politicians from London who saw the treaty of San Stefano as dismantling the balance of power. The offer of an international meeting in Vienna made by the Austrian Foreign Minister Gyula Andrassy was ultimately transformed into a congress in Berlin which was accepted by the European Powers.⁷²

The final conclusion of the congress on 13 July 1878 was welcomed by the English press. The agreement secured the interests of Great Britain. *The Times* believed that the British government could be proud that it had resolved the Eastern question. It was the “firm front” of British diplomacy that stopped the Russians from occupying Constantinople.⁷³ The final establishment of borders in the Balkans by breaking the San Stefano agreement was a success for Great Britain.

The *Daily Telegraph* expressed joy that Russia had gained little from the start of the war. For she had acquired only “shameful spoil” in the form of Bessarabia.⁷⁴ The daily believed that the transfer of Romanian territories to Russia was plunder sanctioned by the congress.

The *Morning Post* expressed an opinion that a balance of power has finally prevailed in Europe. The daily emphasised the role of Prime Minister Lord Beaconsfield in forcing Russia “without firing a shot or shedding a single drop of blood [...] to acknowledge the supremacy of public law”.⁷⁵

The afternoon daily *Pall Mall Gazette* spoke negatively about the achievements of the congress. The concessions to Russia were too great and in no sense did it limit her aspirations.

Nor was the liberal *Daily News* particularly happy with the agreement. The small states in the Balkans (Greece, Serbia, Montenegro and Romania) had a “moral title” to the territories taken over by others. Russia did not act as their defender, instead exercising the right of the stronger to undertake conquest.⁷⁶

⁷⁰ Mieczysław Tanty, *Bosfor i Dardanele w polityce Wielkich Mocarstw* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1982), 244.

⁷¹ “The episode had shown the weakness in the British organization for war and for imperial defence,” Barbara Jelavich, “British Means of offense against Russia in the Nineteenth Century,” *Russian History* 1/1 (1974): 127.

⁷² Mihailo D. Stojanovic, *The Great Powers and the Balkans, 1875–1878* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 235.

⁷³ *The Times*, 17 I 1878.

⁷⁴ *Daily Telegraph*, 15 I 1878.

⁷⁵ *Morning Post*, 16 I 1878.

⁷⁶ *Daily News*, 17 I 1878.

Russia was humiliated as a result of the congress. The blow she received was only to her prestige, because she gained new territories. Britain achieved diplomatic success, forcing the victorious state to subject its success to verification of the European powers.

Press attitudes towards Russia in the second part of the 19th century were connected with perceptions of the security of the British Empire. When the events connected with the Eastern Question began unfolding into war, Britain felt threatened. The imagined proximity of the Turkish Straits to the Suez Canal was enough to send the newspapers into a frenzy.

It was fairly common among the British newspapers to underline that superpower status required the preservation of the colonial empire. Its pride was common among the English readers, regardless of their political affiliation. It was believed that the colonies confirmed the primacy of Great Britain throughout the world. To so much as question this position was enough to sharply verbally attack the opponent using age-old expressions and preconceptions.

Despite the fact that the British press spoke essentially along party lines, the differences were not fundamental. The conservative press saw Russia as a backward power that pursued a policy of unlimited aggression in every possible direction. Russia was suspected and often accused of being hostile to British possessions. The British press felt that their own empire was a moral obligation: Britain had accepted the responsibility for the spiritual and physical development of the conquered peoples. Hence, there was frequent criticism of the Russians in the conservative press as conquering only for the sake of possessing.

On the pages of the liberal press, Russia fared slightly better. It was believed that sometimes it acted as a civilising power particularly in contrast with Turkey. The Russian policy of conquest has been compared to English actions in the previous century. It was generally believed that there was enough space for Russian and British possessions. Thoughts similar to those of the liberal newspapers were proclaimed by the cross-party *The Times*. However, during the crisis, while British interests appeared to be threatened by the actions of Russia, even the liberal newspapers attacked the tsarist state. The empire's determination to maintain its economic dominance and political importance was the most important goal for the press.

Opinions about Russia expressed in British newspapers and periodicals in the 19th century were generally similar. Unfriendly, but also simplified judgments predominated, presenting the tsarist empire as a hostile expansionist and uncivilised backward state.