

THE EASTERN QUESTION

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The Eastern Question by H. A. Munro Butler-Johnstone

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BY

H. A. MUNRO-BUTLER-JOHNSTONE, M.P.

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THE EASTERN QUESTION.

CHAPTER I.

SINCE the debate on Mr. Yorke's motion in the House of Commons, the condition of Turkey has been much discussed in the press and in the country. But the chief issue raised has been that of the solvency of the Ottoman Government—an important part, no doubt, but still only a part, of the much wider subject which is known by the name of the "Eastern Question." The other issues raised by this question—viz. what are the British interests involved in the maintenance of the Ottoman Empire? whether or not the integrity of that empire is now compromised beyond redemption? whether there are elements of vitality and recovery still left in Turkey? what are the chances of these recuperative elements being promptly developed? whether any interference on the part of England would avert a catastrophe? and if so, whether we have, morally, politically, and diplomatically, the right to interfere, and what form that interference ought to take?—these have only been lightly and incidentally touched upon; and yet, as far as this country is concerned, they have a very momentous bearing on its policy and its interests. These, then, are the questions which I propose to discuss.

It ought not to be necessary to prove the importance to England of maintaining the integrity of the Ottoman Empire; for when a policy has been consistently maintained for a century past by every English statesman who has governed the country, the burden of proof ought certainly to lie on the shoulders of those who would alter or disturb

that traditional policy. Now Chatham, Pitt, Wellington, Castlereagh, Canning, and Palmerston were all of one way of thinking on this subject, and, in our own time, we thought it worth while to undertake a costly war in order to vindicate that policy. Chatham went so far as to say that he would not condescend to argue with a man who did not see the vital importance to England of maintaining the Ottoman Empire.

But, besides those of England, all the great statesmen of Europe have been agreed on the importance of pursuing the same policy; Gustavus III., Frederick the Great, Hertzberg, Napoleon, Talleyrand, Metternich, all agreed in this. But I know that authority alone, however weighty, will not do in these days; and I will try to prove this point, not only by authority, but by reasoning, for it is the cornerstone of my argument, and if this is not firm, the whole superstructure will be insecure. This is all the more necessary, inasmuch as by constant repetition a maxim of policy, once recognised as a practical truism, acquiesced in by everybody, becomes treated first as a trite commonplace, and afterwards as a vulgar error.

When people say that the Turkish Empire is our "road to India," I really believe that in the majority of cases they are thinking of a material road, and consider that if we can only secure Egypt, our "road to India" is safe. The Emperor Nicholas, in his offers to Sir Hamilton Seymour, took advantage of the *equivocal* contained in the expression, and offered to secure our "road to India" by putting this material road in our hands.

Now the Ottoman Empire is our "road to India" in a very different and a much larger sense than one simply geographical. We have 30,000,000 (sometimes computed at a very much higher figure) of Mahomedan fellow-subjects in India. On the whole, these subjects are not at present disaffected towards us. There are, no doubt, numerous fanatics among them, who give us from time to time

a good deal of trouble. There is on our north-west frontier a permanent camp of Wahabee fanatics, which is the refuge of Mahommedan disaffection throughout our possessions, and it has cost us a good many expensive campaigns, and may yet cost us a good many more. But the Mahommedans in general in India, and especially the well-to-do and wealthy Mahommedans, have always discouraged these fanatical manifestations; and, fortified by the decrees of their law authorities, have declared that Mahommedans may acquiesce peaceably in the British rule.

Hunter's "Mahometan Subjects" goes into the details of this subject, and proves this conclusively. Now this somewhat critical allegiance of 30,000,000 of our Indian fellow-subjects—the most fighting, and therefore dangerous element in India—depends in a great measure on the fact that there does exist, and has long existed, a close alliance in Europe between the head of their faith, the Caliph or Vicar of the Prophet, and the Sovereign of England and India. Hunter mentions the effect produced at a meeting held among Mahommedan natives at Calcutta, in order to discuss this very question of the obligation to revolt, by an old sheikh who appeared among them, having lately arrived from Constantinople, and who spoke to them of the friendship and alliance subsisting between the Sultan and the Queen. On this subject there is a letter written by Sultan Selim to Tippoo Sultan, quoted in Lord Wellesley's despatches, which is well worth referring to. The Turkish Sultan counsels submission to England, on the express grounds that an attack upon England in India would weaken her power in Europe, where her influence was absolutely necessary to the general balance of power. To what an extent the difficulty which we at present experience in governing India would be aggravated by a rupture or cessation of the old alliance between England and Turkey it would, of course, be difficult to estimate exactly; but it is not in a geographical or material sense,

but in a political and moral sense still more, that Turkey is our "road to India."

So much for our Indian interests. Now for our interests in Europe.

Let us suppose a partition of Turkey in Europe. I do not care whether we secure Egypt as part of the plunder or not; twenty Egypts—a hundred Egypts—would, I think I can shew, be no compensation to us whatever. When Catherine of Russia took a famous journey through the Crimea with Joseph II. of Austria, they entertained each other (among other topics, I should fancy) about a partition of the Turkish Empire. A successful partition of Poland had made partitions popular and fashionable. The conversation went on smoothly enough till the Austrian Kaiser asked the Czarina, "How about Constantinople?"

Their scheme had struck on a rock and foundered. "Make it a free city," you will hear some innocent people say. I should like to see you do it. If you did, how long would it remain a "free city?" Why, the coveted prize, *that* in virtue of which the "Eastern Question" has been before the world for two centuries, is not Bulgaria or even Roumelia—it is Constantinople. Servia, Roumania, and the kingdom of Greece may, and no doubt do, desire an extension of territory, a revendication (as the French call it) of their old frontiers; each at the expense of Turkey, and at the expense also of the conflicting claims of each other. But, since the time of Peter the Great, and long before, Constantinople has been the dream of the Czars and of all true Russians, and there is not a Greek professor who does not hug the belief of living to see the re-establishment of the Byzantine Empire. It has been the dream of ambition for three centuries past, and does any rational man believe that men will forego the realization of this dream out of a disinterested regard for each other's feelings?

Where are the "free cities" of Europe now? The examples of Cracow, of Frankfort, and of Hamburg, must be

particularly encouraging to the creators of "free cities;" and make Constantinople a "free city" to-morrow, how many months or weeks would you give it to remain so? As a stepping-stone to acquiring it, I can understand those who advocate this policy. It is far easier to absorb and swallow a "free city," than the capital of an empire with a standing army and a large fleet. But, for any one else to be duped by such a transparent pretext, I confess, fills me with compassion. That Constantinople, if it ceases to be Turkish, will before ten years elapse become Russian, appears to me the least hazardous prediction to make in the whole range of politics.

Consider for a moment, now, what would be the consequences to us of Constantinople falling into the hands of a first-rate Power. The balance of power in Europe was seriously deranged by the partition of Poland; among other reasons, because it created a *solidarité* of interest among the three great military Powers in Europe. What is called (though technically, not quite accurately) the Holy Alliance was one consequence of it, and the alliance between these same Powers at the present day is a remote consequence of the same thing. Now that France's influence is practically extinct, these three Powers can do exactly what they like on the Continent, provided, of course, they are agreed; their power being only limited by the fact of England being still master on the seas. But if the Turkish Empire were partitioned, not only would a new principle of *solidarité* spring up among the partitioning Powers, but it would now be a maritime league, and a league with resources which must wrest the mastery of the seas from us. Fancy a great Power with the keys of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles in its possession! The Sea of Marmora would become one gigantic harbour, as large as all the harbours of Europe put together; in the hands, too, of a nation with inexhaustible resources, a practically unlimited supply of Greek sailors, and all the appliances of modern society at

its command. Wilhelmshaven and Kiel, two miserable scraps of harbours in comparison, have been supposed to endanger our maritime supremacy in the German Ocean. What would become of that maritime supremacy in the Mediterranean, with Constantinople in the hands of a first-rate Power? Constantinople in the hands of a first-rate Power, that knew how to apply its splendid resources, means, among other things, absolute supremacy at sea. But this is not all. Turkey and Russia are the two nations in Europe from which the raw material of manufactures is exclusively derived; place both countries under the same government and the same tariff, and the supply sources of your manufactures become dangerously contracted. Again, Turkey, including the nations who are bound by the Turkish tariff, is the very most promising field for our manufacturing enterprise. The progress of English cotton goods in Turkey has been prodigious, and it is capable of almost indefinite development. Now, Turkey has an almost nominal tariff. The Russian tariff is the most highly protective in the world. The very keystone of Turkish commercial policy (as I will shew in more detail in another chapter) is Free Trade. The whole basis and tendency of Russian commercial policy is protection. It was Turkey which defeated the policy of the Berlin decrees, and afforded British commerce an emporium and a means of inundating the Continent with its wares, in spite of and in the very teeth of those decrees; and it is Turkish commercial policy which offers English manufactures at the present day those advantages of free competition, by the help of which it is enabled to command the markets of the East. Wherever Russian influence extends, a prohibitive tariff makes successful competition with their own inferior products impossible.

Here, then, are a few cheerful results to England. Let us recapitulate them:—1. A loss of grip on the loyalty of the fighting element in our Indian possessions. 2. The loss of the command of the sea, the one weapon left in our