

# A rowboat in a hurricane.

An examination of British foreign policy during the Crimean Crisis under the Aberdeen administration, 1852-1855.

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## Introduction and historiography

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“This is no small advantage; and, whether the issue of the question be peace or war, it is, I repeat, matter for congratulation that the union of the Great Powers of Europe should have been accomplished, so far as it has been accomplished.” -George Hamilton-Gordon, 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Aberdeen.<sup>1</sup>

This paper will address the contribution of British prime-minister George Hammliton-Gordon, 4<sup>th</sup> earl of Aberdeen (1784-1860), to the crisis that would lead to the Crimean War (1853-1856). Both the crisis itself and Aberdeen’s role in shaping it have been a contentious subject for well over a century, though in my previous studies on the subject Aberdeen is often represented in an unkind fashion when compared to his more famous contemporaries, chief amongst them being Henry John Temple (1784-1865) best known simply as Viscount Palmerston. This was mostly due to Palmerston being hailed as a classical liberal strong man who guided Britain into the modern age while weak Aberdeen ‘held the country back from true greatness.’ This perception has resulted in a marked misrepresentation of liberal conservative foreign policy, the type that Aberdeen and his fellow Peelites generally pursued, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in general. In this context, the paradoxical phrase ‘liberal conservatism’ refers to a belief in the free market, while maintaining a more conservative stances on most social issues.

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1 Hansard: HL Deb 14 February 1854, vol 130, cols 545-655.

Added to this misrepresentation is that while Aberdeen's stints as foreign minister (1828-1830, 1841-1846) have been examined in a less charged light, his time as prime minister (1852-1855) has not been.<sup>2</sup> This is an obvious gap in the historiography that adversely affects any effort to understand both the origins of the Crimean War and lord Aberdeen, for how can the ramifications of such an important player in the geopolitical landscape of the time be understood if the player himself is not fully understood?

This thesis will answer the questions of what British liberal conservative foreign policy was during the relevant period, with lord Aberdeen serving as the case study. This question will be viewed through a less negatively biased when compared to the almost dogmatically negative perception that has seeped into most of the conventional historiography on the subject, as will be addressed below. Having established a baseline of Aberdeen's foreign policy, the paper will then delve into how this policy contributed to the outbreak of the Crimean War; or, of course, sought to prevent it.

The main argument of this paper would thus be to rehabilitate lord Aberdeen's track record where the Crimean War is concerned, as I contest that it is hardly as criminally bad as is often made out to be.

To answer these questions, we will first delve into Aberdeen himself and his political frame of reference: where did he stand politically and how did he conduct foreign policy? To grasp this an outline of the historiography regarding lord Aberdeen in an effort to demonstrate the score as it stands will be provided, before using one of the later contributions, the PhD *Lord Aberdeen and conservative foreign policy, 1841-1846* by S. Butcher as a jumping off point to discuss lord Aberdeen's policy and conduct. In it, Butcher holds that Aberdeen was a much more decisive and aggressive politician than his 'man of peace' reputation suggests, thus lending a very different interpretation to his policy during the relevant time period, which goes a long way in debunking a sizeable chunk of the historiography regarding that area and Aberdeen. This however, of course, does not speak of the period of the Crimean Crisis.

From that point onwards, having reiterated and tested Butcher's point, this framework will be projected onto the period of 1852-1855, Aberdeen's premiership, and an examination will follow whether or not it remains as valid under these different parameters, and if it gives reason to significantly alter the narrative regarding either Aberdeen or the Crimean Crisis. This will be a, more or less, simple 'blow-by-blow' narration of the crisis and Aberdeen's role in it, which will then be viewed through the lens provided by Butcher, presumably resulting in a differing perspective. This crisis will, again, be contextualized in its historiographic context, both to demonstrate the significance of any alteration to the narrative as well as to display how the debates regarding Aberdeen and the Crisis respectively diverge in terms of development.

Last but not least, the thesis will wrap up with a brief overview of the war effort and its political ramifications, which is where Palmerston will also be discussed in his own right. To anticipate on that, a word on the seemingly ever-present Palmerston: it is unavoidable to mention him, or to resist comparing him to Aberdeen, if only because they were rivals within the same branch of government during the same era. However, where conventionally Palmerston is taken as 'the norm' and

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2 S. Butcher, *Lord Aberdeen and Conservative Foreign Policy, 1841-1846*, (Ireland and the UK: Proquest Dissertation Publishing, 2015), 29-30.

Aberdeen is depicted as 'the outlier' this thesis will do the reverse in that it will view affairs on Aberdeen's terms.

This paper will also discuss the 'who is to blame?' question implicitly, but this will only be done when it is necessary to talk about the motivations of the players and to explain how the crisis escalated from a diplomatic row into a large war; indeed the largest until the first World War. It is not a relevant question in its own right for the purposes here.

Underpinning this thesis will be the works of Conacher, Figes and Butcher primarily in terms of secondary literature, but works that were relevant to the development of the debate surrounding the Crimean War will be woven into the narrative and discussed later on in their own right, regardless of whether or not these works are still salient. The primary literature will mostly be provided, in no particular order of significance, by:

1. Letters sent between princess Lieven and Aberdeen, in which he often revelled in their shared distaste of Liberals. The letters make for an interesting 'peek behind the curtain' in which Aberdeen can simply be himself, which offers a glimpse of many his preoccupations, and notably what did not preoccupy him either.
2. The Greville memoirs, which denote the day to day 'lives and times' of the Aberdeen coalition, though this will mostly be referred to indirectly. Greville was a minor functionary in the grand scheme of things, but he did have frequent contact with members of the cabinet, recorded many of their sessions, and immortalized many of the more interesting moments of the crisis.
3. The Aberdeen papers found at his ancestral home, insofar as they were available, which denote a variety of subjects regarding Aberdeen's life and motivations. These are particularly relevant when it comes to discussing assaults on Aberdeen's character.
4. Parliamentary contributions made by Aberdeen and others to the House of Lords, compiled in the governmental archives and digitized, commonly referred to as 'Hansard'. These are a good way to view the 'public position' of many of the key players, as well as telling us something about how they wanted to crisis to be represented. Aside from that, they are of course a good source for direct info on the issue, though not all problems encountered during the crisis were discussed in the House.

Between these sources we have a reliable variety of public and private statements made by Aberdeen and others regarding his policies and goals, which should give us ample means to either reconstruct Aberdeen's thinking during the Crimean Crisis, or at the very least test the narratives as we find them in secondary literature. This secondary literature will be omitted from this introduction as it will be discussed more extensively below.

The intended result of this paper is to rehabilitate Aberdeen. Where Butcher already made a compelling argument that Aberdeen's stint in the foreign office was far from the disaster it is often made out to be, this has not been done for Aberdeen's stint as prime-minister. I argue that where Butcher demonstrated that Aberdeen has been misunderstood as Foreign Secretary, he has also been misunderstood as Prime-Minister; and as stated above, I do not believe we can wholly understand this crisis if we cannot even understand one of the main players.



# 1: Lord Aberdeen in thought and memory.

## 1.1: Historiography of lord Aberdeen: an exercise in stagnation.

Any venture into the subject of the Crimean War will sooner or later run into Aberdeen, though the narrative one might find is seldom flattering. Aberdeen has traditionally been painted as a weak man of poor policy, at least insofar foreign policy is concerned. Living in the shadow of many 'greater men', he has often been overlooked: during his early stints at the foreign office he was overshadowed by Robert Peel, twice prime-minister, while his later career was outshone by more outspoken individuals like Palmerston and John Russell (1792-1878).

Before we delve into Aberdeen's frame of reference, we need to establish the debate into which we now mingle ourselves.

One of the earliest contributions to Aberdeen's historiography comes from S. Lane-Poole in 1888. The work was not about Aberdeen himself, instead it was a biography of Stratford Canning, British ambassador to the Ottoman empire from 1825 to 1828 and again from 1841 to 1858.<sup>3</sup> Lane-Poole's work set out to vindicate Canning in the face of earlier studies of the Crimean War, painting him as one of the belligerent antagonists of the story. We will expand more on Canning's supposed misdeeds in the section regarding the Crimean War historiography. In this work, Aberdeen is painted as the antagonist on account of his many clashes with Canning over policy, referring to him as 'weak willed' when compared to Canning. While it has been noted that Lane-Poole was overly forgiving of the subject of his biography and has thus often been decried for misrepresenting the characters of his narrative, his critique of Aberdeen became a staple as far as biographers of Canning went.<sup>4,5</sup>

This view was subsequently reinforced by the publication of the diary of lord Ellenborough, a political rival of Aberdeen, who labelled Aberdeen's more soft-spoken disposition as weak and derided him for being incompetent. These started a trend of displaying Aberdeen in a negative light, and when the biographers of Palmerston got going, the damage became lasting.

Palmerston was by virtue of his long career, and him being favoured by the generally liberal minded bourgeois of the era, often cast in a favourable light, being associated with British successes at the height of its relative power as well as the spreading of the virtues of liberalist influence globally. Aberdeen was often presented as a contrast to this: reviled by the population and press whereas Palmerston was loved, conservative where Palmerston was progressive, unpatriotic where Palmerston was a nationalist. It is not so much in Aberdeen's historiography that we find how he is treated, but rather how he is all but omitted in favour of Palmerston and the other 'great men' of the time.

This is something I can personally attest to, as in my research for this paper I more often than not read about Aberdeen in works that were not directly about Aberdeen, but more nebulous accounts wedged into narratives on the Crimean War, foreign policy or Palmerston.

Aberdeen would only really be touched upon indirectly until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and next to all those indirect touches cast Aberdeen is nothing short of an obstruction to the relentless march of

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3 S. Lane-Poole, *The life of the Right Honourable Stratford Canning, viscount Stratford de Redcliffe* (London, 1888).

4 Further expounded on in S. Lane-Poole, 'Sir Richard Church', *The English Historical Review* (London, 1890), 7-30, 293-305 and 497-522 respectively.

5 Butcher, *Aberdeen and foreign policy*, 11.

progress, a school of thought commonly referred to as the 'Whig interpretation of history'.<sup>6</sup> This view was only really questioned after the second world war, in that the confrontational and imperialist personas of the last age were now viewed in a more nuanced light. Conciliatory figures, people of soft-spoken diplomacy like Aberdeen were now regarded with more value. By this time the damage had already been done though: historical consensus was so permeated with progressive liberal narratives that any and all charitable recounting of Aberdeen's person or the policy that he stood for had been buried to deep.

None of this is to say that there was no attention at all for Aberdeen, just that relatively speaking he has been judged in harsher terms than his contemporaries. Very early examinations of British foreign policy at the time of the Crimean crisis put Palmerston and Aberdeen much closer to each other in terms of policy per example than later narratives would imply. Indeed, Macknight's *Thirsty years of foreign policy: A History of the Secretaryship of the Earl of Aberdeen and Viscount Palmerston of 1855* comes to mind, in which he argued that Aberdeen and Palmerston wanted much the same in regards to foreign policy and that the supposed 'love of peace' that Aberdeen was accused of at the time did not match up with his record.<sup>7</sup> This notion returned occasionally in works dedicated to foreign policy in the subsequent century, but never really became mainstream, nor did it find its way into any works dedicated to Aberdeen himself.

The first significant contribution to the debate regarding Aberdeen which can actually be said to have been solely about him only came about in 1893, a good 33 years after his death and written by his own son, Andrew Gordon.<sup>8</sup> However, *The Earl of Aberdeen* does not quite live up to the nobility that its title would imply: the work objects to the notion of Aberdeen being weak or ineffectual. How could he be weak when he was capable of influencing the headstrong duke of Wellington, once prime-minister, into moderation? Or ineffectual, when his strong working relationship with the French ambassador Francois Guizot helped the détente between the two Western powers in the early 1840s, a time where Gordon notes 'many diplomats evaded their given orders'? However, both these claims are not backed up with evidence in this work, regardless that the latter claim can be validated by the available source material, the absence of their citation makes the work weak.

The next attempt to vindicate Aberdeen was by Frances Balfour in 1923, but her work was a sham by all accounts. *The life of George, Fourth Earl of Aberdeen* attempted to refresh the historiography by inserting the newly found correspondence between Aberdeen and princess Dorothea Lieven, a Baltic noblewoman married to the Russian ambassador to London, into the narrative posited by Gordon three decades prior, but does so poorly.<sup>9</sup> This is in and of itself very much a missed opportunity for the letters quite clearly demonstrate the difference between Aberdeen and the staunch conservatism he is often charged with: where Lieven despised the march of liberalism and saw Palmerston's policies as fundamentally unethical, Aberdeen's complaint was far more about *methods* than his actual dislike of the spirit behind them, affirming Macknight's position.<sup>10</sup> Alas, this notion is not picked up on.

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6 C. E. G. Webster, *The Foreign Policy of Palmerston* (London, 1951) stands as an example of this.

7 T. MacKnight, *Thirty Years of Foreign Policy: A History of the Secretaryships of the Earl of Aberdeen and Viscount Palmerston* (London, 1855) 336-337.

8 A. Gordon, *The Earl of Aberdeen* (London, 1893).

9 F. Balfour, *The Life of George, Fourth Earl of Aberdeen*, in 2 volumes (London, 1923).

10 E. J. Parry, *The Correspondence of Lord Aberdeen and Princess Lieven, 1832-54*, in 2 volumes (London, 1938-9), IX.

1930 saw a re-examination of Aberdeen's relationship with the mentioned French Ambassador Guizot as posited by Gordon decades earlier by E.J. Parry. He emphasized the orthodox view in concluding that the entente between France and Britain was in a terrible position regardless of how well the two men got on, as Gordon had implied that this personal bond is what all but salvaged the entente, and that Aberdeen struggled with facing his responsibilities, an oft levelled accusation that was exemplified by Aberdeen's lacklustre attempts to engage in the Spanish succession crisis.<sup>11</sup>

Any real headway in examining Aberdeen's European policy only came about in the post-war period. In the decades prior Aberdeen's foreign policy ventures in America had been looked at and resulted in some revisionism of Aberdeen's character, but it made very little impact in the view of Aberdeen as a whole, much less his European policies. On the contrary, in that avenue he continued to attract great criticism and derision even when none of the works were concerned with him primarily. However, some gems of nuance do find us: perhaps the single greatest contribution to topic of this paper specifically was J.B. Conacher's *The Aberdeen Coalition: 1852-1855* of 1968.<sup>12</sup> This work has often been described as a 'narration' as opposed to an analysis, but in so doing it presents a clear image of the Aberdeen coalition and the prime-minister's role therein. Charles Greville, a member of the government apparatus, whose writings Conacher relies on, remarked that it was due to Aberdeen that this cabinet of diverse, strong personalities functioned at all: "...in the Cabinet he is both liked and respected, being honest, straightforward, and firm, very fair, candid, and unassuming."<sup>13</sup>

Rather a far cry from how he had been portrayed in the historiography up until that point. In this work he is mostly regaled as a voice of moderation in the run-up to the Crimean War, functioning as a much-needed counterweight to Palmerston and Russel during this period, and does good work in that regard, right up until there is an actual war and Aberdeen cannot muster the firmness required of a war minister. It must be noted that this work is not concerned primarily with Aberdeen as a person the way this thesis is, but like Lane-Poole it is definitely noteworthy.

A decade later, L. Iremonger wrote the first work to concern itself with Aberdeen primarily *and* did so while living up to basic scholarly requirements, contrary to her predecessors. In *Lord Aberdeen: a Biography of the fourth Earl of Aberdeen* Iremonger makes use of papers from Aberdeen's estate, probably not at all dissimilar to Gordon 150 years prior, but she actually cites said sources so that we may trace her reasoning.<sup>14</sup> Iremonger's work creates a slight shift in the portrayal of Aberdeen's person, as whereas before he was often derided as incompetent due to personal disposition and sentimentality, this work demonstrates that Aberdeen was actually quite realistic in his dealings with the French in particular, as opposed to the sabre rattling and sentimental nationalism of other parties, including Palmerston.<sup>15</sup> This did not diminish that fact that Aberdeen still wasn't always very effective and his very lack of perceived passion did demonstrate to Iremonger that the previous

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11 E. J. Parry, 'A Review of the Relations between Guizot and Lord Aberdeen, 1840-1852' in *History*, xxiii, (1938), 25-36.

12 J. Conacher, *The Aberdeen Coalition 1852- 1855: A Study in Mid-Nineteenth Century Party Politics* (Cambridge, 1968).

13 C.F. Greville, *The Greville Memoirs*, edited by L. Strachey and R. Fulford, book IV, 425.

14 L. Iremonger, *Lord Aberdeen: A Biography of the fourth Earl of Aberdeen, K. G., K. T., Prime Minister 1852-1855* (London, 1978).

15 Iremonger, *Lord Aberdeen*, 144.



historiography was correct in generally concluding that Aberdeen stood as an opposite to Palmerston.

This view of Aberdeen would change little. M. Chamberlain's 1983 *Lord Aberdeen: A Political Biography* would reiterate many of the same talking points as Iremonger. Even if she was far friendlier towards Aberdeen's policies regarding the American continent, her position on his handling of Anglo-French relations are outright damning, as was her position on his effectiveness in general.<sup>16</sup> While both these works are 'fresh' and have softened the tone of instinctual derision, I would argue that they have not quite moved beyond the Palmerstonian framework as they tend to view Aberdeen on those terms rather than make an attempt to understand Aberdeen's policy on its own terms.

The last contribution is the earlier mentioned is a PhD from 2015 by S.J. Butcher under the name of 'Lord Aberdeen and Conservative Foreign Policy, 1841-1846'. The work inspired this thesis greatly, as it seeks to understand conservative foreign policy during Aberdeen's tenure at the foreign office under the Peel government. In it, he describes a mental map for Aberdeen and from it seeks to ascribe different interpretations to his policy decisions; essentially changing the parameters of the debate in a way that is decidedly fresh. Alas, Butcher does not go into the Crimean Crisis as it was beyond the scope of his paper and argued on top of it that applying this same map to Aberdeen in his role as prime-minister would be difficult due to the difference in position: where Aberdeen in his capacity as foreign secretary was, or so Butcher argues against the common perception, more or less free to pursue his own policy ideals and use whatever methods he saw fit, as prime-minister in a coalition government this would be difficult.

There is some merit to this argument: Aberdeen was in near constant contention with some of his ministers regarding foreign policy, and when the Crimean War began the policy was all but high-jacked by Palmerston. That said, during the run up to said war there were many differences of opinions on how to approach the Crimean Crisis, and of all these conflicts Aberdeen usually got his way. In the historiography this has often been summed up as, and derided as, 'Aberdeen the peacemaker', but Butcher's interpretation of Aberdeen is much more cynical, as we will discuss below.

Throughout most of Aberdeen's historiography, he has thus been depicted as either weak-willed, incompetent or outright malevolent. While some attempts at nuance within this have been attempted, it is clear that they were still discussing Aberdeen on Palmerstonian terms. Butcher is the first to firmly break with this tradition and spurs the debate forward. In the next section, we will examine the merit of this approach.

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16 M. Chamberlain, *Lord Aberdeen: A Political Biography* (London, 1983), 532.

## 1.2: Aberdeen's political ideology

Aberdeen's coalition represented a split in British thought regarding Europe: those that wished to engage with the continent extensively and those who did not. Britain was an island and as such it had historically taken advantage of the fact that it could seal itself off from the wasps' nest that was continental power politics. The degree to which Britain *can* pretend the rest of the world does not concern it is of course a debate that is still ongoing. Regardless, Britain has often attempted to isolate itself, a policy that was even at times suggested to have been perfectly in line with the natural order: why connect an island to the continent when they had been created separately by god for a reason?<sup>17</sup> This stance is often referred to as 'Splendid Isolation'.

More so than nowadays, Britain could get away with it: at the time the English Channel was a formidable barrier, and the British fleet was not something any other Great Power could hope to rival. Indeed, after the Napoleonic Wars, Britain was in the luxurious position of indisputably being the first amongst the Great Powers. This allowed it to, to a large extent at least, dictate the terms on which it interacted with the outside world, and for the sake of its far-flung empire and its trading position it often did so. This is not to imply that Britain was a Superpower like the United States or the Soviet Union were in their heydays. Britain lacked both the military might and the desire to.<sup>18</sup> But its overall goal was consistent: maintain British interests and honour and to do so with as little commitments to anyone as possible; treaties of any binding sort were avoided wherever possible.<sup>19</sup>

However, as Britain was loathe to accept binding agreements for any longer duration, the question of to what extent Britain was to involve itself with the continent was a perpetual one. Though the debate might seem superfluous given the limited parameters outlined above, it could result in some serious policy differences: where Lord Castlereagh, a conservative, signed Britain up for the Vienna settlement and the Concert of Europe he did so in hopes of keeping Britain an active player in the post-war theatre so as to protect Britain from being dragged into another war. His successor to the post, George Canning, also a conservative, changed the interpretation of said agreements to be much more fluid and non-binding. He referred to the Concert system as a 'questionable and strange thing.'<sup>21</sup> While it must be said the Castlereagh's interpretation of the Concert's role was quite extreme for isolationist British standards, as will be expanded upon below, that such disagreement over the issue existed between two people who represented the same strand of political ideology in the same time period is telling in regards to how divisive it was and emphasizes the need to look at influential individuals like Aberdeen when trying to determine the exact type of policy for a given era and situation: it could quite literally differ from person to person.

So where does Aberdeen place on this spectrum, and has this been represented correctly in the historiography? I argue that he has been both misrepresented and appreciated correctly in the same breath. To recap: in the historiography Aberdeen has until recently been regarded as a weak fumbling arch-conservative that was the anthesis of Palmerston and held Britain back in the dark

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17 C. Howard, *Britain and the Casus Belli 1822-1902* (Bristol 1974), 7.

18 P. Kennedy, *Rise and fall of the Great Powers: economic change and military conflict from 1500 to 2000* (Great Britain: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 152.

19 Howard, *Casus Belli*, 8-12.

20 The contemporary reader might quirk a bemused brow at the mention of 'honour', but make no mistake: honour, however nebulous the concept was, was an oft recurring phrase in parliamentary debates and many a policy has been ratified or rejected on account of it.

21 D.S. Brown, *Palmerston and the politics of foreign policy, 1846-1855* (1998), 152-153.

ages. Even the most generous of studies will label Aberdeen as unsuited for foreign policy.<sup>22</sup> This puts Aberdeen and Palmerston too far apart for one, as it seems many historians forgot that Aberdeen was a *liberal* conservative and that as a result he was not as far removed from Palmerston as the Whig interpretation of British history would have you believe: Palmerston was sceptical of the Concert and very appreciative of British exceptionalism, but he was also inclined to military interventionism to promote Liberal values; Aberdeen preferred to intervene only when absolutely needed, but was by contrast an avid supporter of maintaining close ties to the continent. While some historians have depicted these schools of thought as a binary, it is quite obviously a spectrum.

More importantly though, it starts the observation of Aberdeen off on the wrong foot: by comparing him to Palmerston, and all the baggage that comes with doing so, rather than judging the man and his policies on their own merit. Dismissing Aberdeen's actions as the result of being unsuited to his position on account of temperament or for the sin of not being Palmerston simplifies the historical situation and Aberdeen's person to a degree that I think is not backed up by his track record. To understand the mind that underlaid this track record, we must discuss the three major influences on Aberdeen's political thought: William Pitt the Younger (1795-1806), Robert Stewart (1769-1822, better known as lord Castlereagh) and Robert Peel (1788-1850).

Aberdeen's early political views formed under the influence of William Pitt, prime minister from 1804 till his death in 1806. Pitt has been noted to have been a conservative pragmatist above all else, not adhering obsessively to one ideology or another and to stress the need for general European cooperation to achieve British interests.<sup>23</sup> This political expediency, or attempts of it, a more cynical observer might point out, is one of the root causes for charges of Aberdeen being inconsistent in policy throughout his career. It would also be one of the defining qualities by which he managed the intricacies of his coalition decades after Pitt's passing; by not allowing himself to be defined by ideology, which allowed for a flexibility that was paramount in managing headstrong ministers. But for foreign policy matters, the pro-Europe underpinning in contrast to the staunch nationalism so celebrated when discussing his political advisory Palmerston is one to remember as I believe it informed his political deliberations far more than any notion of conservatism ever did, though it would be a mistake to assume it was absent.

Another trait instilled by exposure to Pitt and his spiritual successors was the notion of duty to the Crown, for which personal ambition ill-suited and a willingness to sacrifice in the name of the greater good.<sup>24</sup> While this may seem like dramatic notion, much like 'honour', it is telling that throughout his political career Aberdeen eschewed grand gestures, public speaking and generally only engaged with concerns of public opinion where they were relevant to persuading his ministers, which often amounted to holding fast in the face of negative public outcry.

The second major influence on Aberdeen was the aforementioned lord Castlereagh, under which Aberdeen served at the foreign office during his tenure as foreign secretary. Lord Castlereagh was, much more so than his contemporaries and even 'continental' Aberdeen, willing to intertwine Britain with continental Europe in a consistent and binding way. It has been said of him that he was more concerned with preventing another war by involving Britain in the continent, than to force Britain and the continent apart only to then scramble for allies when war inevitably did break out. In this he pushed for British participation in the Congress system after the Napoleonic Wars, but as this

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22 Chamberlain, *Aberdeen*, 532.

23 Butcher, *Aberdeen and foreign policy*, 43.

24 R. Harris, *The Conservatives: A History* (London, 2011), 19.

system was closely intertwined with the Holy Alliance's desire to use it as a pretext to intercede on domestic levels whenever progressive tendencies emerged, this system was suspect to both the British progressives and most conservatives. Their British brand of conservatism brought the typical 'splendid isolation' strain of thought to the forefront in a moderate way in that they regarded a country's domestic affairs as first and foremost their own and not to be subject to the Concert of Europe unless said domestic affairs held the potential to disrupt the balance of power in Europe read: alter the Vienna settlement to such an extent that it was to the detriment of the British.

It should be noted that 'balancing' in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe typically meant that all Great Powers gained and lost geopolitical power at roughly the same rate so that no single power fell woefully behind or that another power left all others in the dust. This balance was upheld even by powers that nominally had a chance of becoming regional hegemonies because struggles between these powers risked the chance of them collapsing under the strain and becoming a foothold for revolutionary sentiment.<sup>25</sup> This, given the recent experience of the Napoleonic Wars, was to be prevented at all costs and so the balance was construed in such a way, via the Congress system, to favour the status quo at all times. The only power, at first, that was openly revisionist when it came to the Vienna settlement was France; an unsurprising revelation when one considers that the Vienna settlement was of course conceived precisely to keep France down.

This all is by no means to say that Aberdeen was wholly unsympathetic to the idea of foreign intervention. Rather, he felt that it should only be done in the event of revolution, because revolution was inherently destabilizing, or when British interests were directly threatened. An evolutionary path to more progressive ideas was all in all welcome in his world-view. This is most clearly demonstrated in Aberdeen's letter to princess Lieven on November 8, 1833, wherein he comments his happiness regarding a fortuitous meeting of the 'Northern Courts' regarding amongst other things, the question of the Spanish succession. Notably, he remarks that they could 'implement all the reforms that were needed' in an orderly way, contrasting it with the 'destructive' revolutionary tendencies that would prevail had the conservative powers not seen fit to curb it.<sup>26</sup> This clearly demonstrates Aberdeen's willingness to embrace reform, even along the lines of revolutionary ideas, as he calls the British government 'Revolutionary' in its conduct. Aberdeen is averse to the chaotic implementation of these policies however, hence Britain ought to be partially involved in the affairs of Spain, but no more than absolutely required to stave off revolution. This falls in line with the pragmatism inspired by Pitt as well as the political legacy of Lord Castlereagh: not being involved in European affairs would disturb the international scene down the road, so it was practical to be at least partially involved with the continent to stop revolutions which would destabilize the balance all on their own if given the chance.<sup>27</sup> Striking a balance between these things would allow Britain to stay on top while also remaining flexible.

The notion of political expediency and ideological fluidity gave rise to a recurring desire for sound, cold economic policy and successive British administrations in this vein (in which Aberdeen all participated in some capacity) sought to balance the books. No truer was this than for the Peel administration (1841-1846), which came to power during a recession. This was a trait that strongly informed Aberdeen's outlook on governing: not flashy, not dramatic, just good business, or so Butcher argues.

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25 C.J. Bartlett, *Peace, war and the European Great Powers, 1814-1914* (New York 1996), 16.

26 Parry, *Correspondence*, 12.

27 Butcher, Aberdeen, 52.

When Aberdeen settled into his second stint in the foreign office in 1841, the administration inheriting problems from the previous administration that included a massive public debt, recession and an international relations situation that was somewhat tense; in no small part due to his predecessor's, Palmerston, inconsiderate approach to France, Peel and Aberdeen decided upon a simple objective: balance the budget and do not rock the boat. Public debt was high enough as it was and the British global position, on account of its strained diplomatic track record in recent years, was precarious enough that discretion was the better part of valour. Peel concerned himself with the domestic front, trusting Aberdeen to manage the rest of the world in a similarly simple and pragmatic fashion. It should be noted that in the historiography of Aberdeen, the years under Peel are often depicted as Peel keeping an eye on the wayward Aberdeen, emphasizing the latter's 'weak' position. Butcher disproves this by demonstrating that Peel held Aberdeen's opinion in high regard and generally left the younger man to his own devices; an interesting degree of trust in the agency of a man that he was supposedly keeping an eye on.

Obviously, the objective of balancing the books and not rocking the boat of international relations does not make for very exciting politics, a notion that has undoubtedly affected the historiographical record. It is also arguable that during this time Aberdeen learned the value of keeping flexibility when making decisions. Aberdeen has often been depicted as indecisive, but Peel has been credited with advising him to 'weigh every possible contingency, but never decide until the last moment, when all facts and circumstances are before you.'<sup>28</sup>

But it *does* demonstrate a clear view of governing that might not be apparent when judged besides Palmerston: Aberdeen, while concerned with British honour and citing it occasionally in his parliamentary contributions, where it could in truth be swapped out for 'British interests', was not trying to throw Britain's weight around but attempting to keep the peace. Telling examples are that in territorial disputes such as the one over Tahiti with France and with the United States in Canada. Here, Aberdeen sought not to confront but to wring concessions. Where Palmerston would happily lean on Britain's might, Aberdeen simply sought concessions regarding trade and access to strategic positions and tended to avoid conflict where none was required. This may seem 'meek', but when one considers that Aberdeen was primarily interested in striking a good deal that left both parties satisfied while also filling the coffers, this 'meek' policy and the corresponding results are perfectly in line with his intent. To deem such a stance a failure because it was not as flashy as Palmerston's is problematic because it ignores that Aberdeen did not want to achieve the exact same things as Palmerston.

Conversely, where Palmerston courted revolutionaries across Europe and sought to upend the Vienna settlement wherever possible and spread the cause of liberalism throughout the world, Aberdeen sought, again, to simply keep the waters quiet so that the trading vessels could sail unabated. War and revolution were, Aberdeen had learned as early as the Napoleonic Wars, not good for business or the status quo, and that was exactly what Aberdeen sought to maintain. The Vienna settlement was in Aberdeen's eyes positive not necessarily because it was conservative in nature but because the status quo it provided served British interests in that the balance of power was tipped in Britain's favour and it facilitated the framework by which nations could peacefully resolve differences as well as provide a framework for if hostilities broke out, that being that if any nation acted out of line to alter the settlement to a significant degree, the other powers would intercede.

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28 Conacher, *The Aberdeen Coalition*, 198.

For all that Butcher makes Aberdeen out to be this calculating realpolitician, which to a large extent he arguably was, it must be noted that he was also a man of peace and dialogue by personal conviction, as the Napoleonic Wars had impressed upon him the value of peace for diplomacy and trade, so had it impressed upon him the human cost of war, a lesson he took to heart. This does not diminish that Butcher has made a compelling argument for Aberdeen being far harsher in his policy, or more willy one might say, than the historiography suggests.

### 1.3: Conservative policy and France.

The alluded examples mentioned above deal primarily with issues outside of the European sphere itself, but this paper deals more with Aberdeen's policy regarding continental Europe proper. Before we can discuss the Crimean Crisis, we must exemplify the above in an earlier setting of his secretaryship of the foreign office of 1841-1846; one where, ironically, Aberdeen had perhaps more agency to do his part when compared to the earl's premiership, as Peel tended to leave foreign policy in Aberdeen's hands.

British and French relationship has never been simple and in 1841, on the heels of a recession and with diplomatic ties strained due to Palmerston's blundering and the fact that the two nations had stood on opposite ends in the Pastry War in Mexico, this was all the more so.<sup>29</sup> France had a bad reputation in general at this point for being a disruptive, revolutionary country; the July revolution little over a decade earlier had done little to discourage this viewpoint. This made the country in many ways a natural enemy to men like Aberdeen who valued peace and stability, and yet he had to make it work somehow. While earlier historians have described this attempt of Aberdeen to reach entente a failure, again when compared to Palmerston's quadruple alliance against the Holy Alliance of the 1830s, it might again be worth questioning whether they were looking at this through a lens that considered what it was that Aberdeen was hoping to achieve.

It was a stroke of luck that Aberdeen got along quite famously with his French counterpart, Francois Guizot (1787-1874). Both were, to an extent, considered oddities in their respective nation: Aberdeen, who openly wept at the funeral of his first wife, in defiance of the British the 'stiff upper lip', was oft dismissed as overly sensitive and 'un-English'. While one might question whether this assessment holds any validity when translated to policy considerations, it did resonate with Guizot, who was accused of the very same things.<sup>30</sup>

This kinship also translated to the political realm: where Aberdeen was a liberal conservative, Guizot was a moderate liberal. Both were keen on maintaining order in their respective states and that while they would seldom see eye to eye on matters, the unacceptability of war was something they whole-heartedly agreed on. Aberdeen elaborated on the resulting entente in the house of lords when pressed about French influence on the Spanish unrest in 1844. The House wanted to know if Britain had been signed up for a common policy with France regarding Spain by Aberdeen. Aberdeen responded that 'this good understanding was not founded upon any specific agreement or alliance, but upon a belief that the essential interests of the two countries are involved, and it depends upon mutual trust in the honour and integrity of the two Governments of England and France.'<sup>31</sup> The idea that the *entente* was a failure due to its more fluid character misses that that was entirely the intend of it, at least insofar Aberdeen was concerned, and if we are to consider the strong tendency of the British toward flexibility and detachment, a policy Palmerston was often praised for, it is dubious to consider it a failure on these grounds.

This relatively cordial approach to France should not be mistaken for softness though: when France attempted to expand its control of north Africa in the early 1840s, Aberdeen was not remiss to send warships to pressure France out of it. This marks an important distinction between Aberdeen's views

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<sup>29</sup> Palmerston had occupied the position of foreign secretary for much of the 1830s and his blustering, haughty style of diplomacy had ruffled quite a few feathers.

<sup>30</sup> Butcher, *Aberdeen*, 75.

<sup>31</sup> Hansard, Feb 12 1844, Column 511.

on France, which he considered to be a loose projectile at best, and his personal faith in Guizot, and even *that* was not without caveats, as Aberdeen disclosed to his confidant princess Lieven: 'Most assuredly, there is no public man in Europe whom I should be more disposed personally to esteem than M. Guizot, but he must follow more or less the system of his government, and habitual management of affairs, so that even of him, we can not be certain.'<sup>32</sup>

Many have considered that this personal relationship was cumbersome because it made the good relations of France and Britain entirely reliant on the incumbents of their respective offices, which in the event of either of the gentlemen being succeeded in said office would result in a faltering of the relations. While an apt observation, it must be stressed that in the tense atmosphere of the time between two countries that were already distrustful of each other, this personal relationship was perhaps far more stable than any attempt to broker a more formal settlement. Such a settlement sounds good as a hypothetical, but when one considers the oft attested British aversion to binding agreements, they too would not have lasted for any significant amount of time nor been of any help in calming the stormy waters. As we will later see, as France embraced revolution again in 1848, the waters became very difficult to calm.

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<sup>32</sup> Parry, *Correspondence*, 190.



## 1.4: Russia in the geopolitical landscape and Aberdeen's conservative foreign policy before the crisis.

Nicholas I (1796-1855) ascended the Russian throne in 1825 amid domestic unrest and revolutionary circumstances. He learned from the experience: he would in time become known as the Gendarme of Europe for his extremely reactionary views and his militant stance in enforcing them as well as his bullying handling of the Eastern Question. This stance also included the suppression of liberal tendencies in all parts of the Russian empire, notably in the Polish regions, where the refugees fleeing the Tsar's crackdown would often go on to ask for asylum in the West, raise awareness for their cause and even join up with their militaries, a sore point in European relations for years.<sup>33</sup> These tendencies and the rivalry over central Asia known as the 'Great Game' brought it and the British Empire into each other's orbit.

With all this confrontation, Russian interaction with the West has always been a difficult subject. M. Malia argues strongly in *Russia under Western Eyes* that Russia's reception in Europe has always been dependant primarily on whether or not her expansionist tendencies were aligned with those of Europe's Great Powers; it determined whether Russia was one of the 'good guys' or not.<sup>34</sup> This positioning of Russia along the spectrum of positive or negative was rarely done by halves: either she was the darling of Europe as she was under Catherine the Great and Alexander I or utterly despised, as was often the case under Nicholas. The aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars presented a rather clear answer for the time being: Russia, having just defeated Napoleon and liberating much of Europe, was in line with the 'good guys' for now. But said sweeping victory brought Europe face to face with a deeply idealistic Tsar in Alexander I (1777-1825) who wanted to unite Europe under Christendom and steward her forces in vigilance against the Revolution, something that underpinned both the Congress of Europe and Russia's Holy Alliance with Austria and Prussia. While it was tempting for Britain to pull out of such a situation entirely, leaving a weakened continent to the tender mercy of Russia (however well intended the Tsar was considered to be) was not in her interests. It has often been said that continental powers feared for 'A Britain not interested enough in continental affairs and a Russia that was all too interested.' The Concert provided a way to channel Russia's interest while also tying the Brits to the continent.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, not unlike the United States and the Soviet Union, the two greatest powers of the time made nice and carried on. However, as Russia's political mood shifted further down the reactionary rabbit hole and her preoccupation with the ailing Ottoman empire became more apparent, many a British statesman was starting to worry.

British interests were strongly inclined towards the Eastern Mediterranean being in the hands of the weak Ottoman Empire: it allowed Britain to approach the region from a position of strength which was not only lucrative in trade but also enabled them faster access to their possessions in India as prior to the Suez Channel, the land route through the Middle-East was a preferable option to sailing around the Cape. However, the Eastern Question, ever so dominant in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, made this land route less than stable.

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33 Figs, *Crimea*, 61.

34 Malia, *Under Western Eyes*, 413.

35 Bartlett, *Peace, War*, 14.

The Eastern Question mainly revolved around the viability of the Ottoman Empire, and what to do about its European territories. To many it was not a question of if the empire would fall, but when and what to do when it did. The spectre of Russia coming onto the theatre as a player on the back of an Ottoman collapse, be it natural or forced, sent shivers down spines, for it would present the prospect of the continent's largest military gaining access warm water ports that would allow them to train and harbour a sizeable naval force.<sup>36</sup> Combining that with a seemingly endless supply of men and resources, Russia might well pose a great threat to Britain.

Added to this, the *Testament of Peter the Great*, which later turned out falsified, outlined Russia's plans to conquer well into the Indian peninsula and Ottoman Empire. From Britain's perspective, Russia was a very realistic geopolitical adversary.

Russia's behaviour in the region did little to alter this perception. The country's foreign policy regarding their Muslim neighbours to the south was age old and had been all but sanctioned after 1815 by the other powers. The Vienna settlement recognized the interests of the Great Powers throughout Europe and thus assigned, more or less, spheres of influence to each: Prussia and Austria held sway in the German confederation, Austria and Russia shared sway over the Balkan, Britain the high waves etc. In this constellation, the Ottoman Empire resided in the Russian sphere of influence, though partially shared with Austria on account of the Balkans being in both their spheres. Hence the international stage was set for Russia to take a firm hand if it wanted to.

And it often had reason to, as Russia had strong religious motifs for their intervention in the Ottoman Empire, as can be found in the messiah complex that both Alexander and Nicholas shared: they felt it their duty to God to protect the flock of Christendom from the Muslim horde. As such they often threw themselves onto the fate of the Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>37</sup> This combined with Nicholas' militant methods consistently raised the question, for decades, of whether or not he wished to contain his southern neighbours, control them or simply annex them.

It must be stressed though, that the reality of Russia as a threat was overblown, even if popular perception at the time often viewed it as such. Aside from the *Testament of Peter the Great* being a fake, the Russian economy was weak compared to that of Britain, lagging far behind other Western countries throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its military was effective due to numbers, not competence or sound equipment or savvy leadership, as the Crimean War would demonstrate. Its society offered little incentive to modernize after British example; indeed it would be well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century before Russia underwent an industrial revolution of any significance, and the Russian threat becomes ever more a paper tiger when one considers the fact that, to the south of Moscow, Russia had precisely zero tracts of railway, and was in no position to build the tracks with their weak economy.<sup>38</sup> All this was not as well known at the time though, in popular perception, and indeed in the mind of political leaders such as Palmerston, Russia was the great danger on the horizon.

However, as Aberdeen was trying not to rock the boat and the Tsar had done little to warrant any overt scrutiny, he was inclined to take the Tsar's words at face value when he declared no interest in annexing the Ottoman Empire. This might seem odd, all things considered, but when we consider the long list of Russian ailments some of which are outlined above it becomes readily apparent that filling the power vacuum left by the disappearance of the Ottomans would be far more dangerous

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36 Schroeder, *Crimean War*, 411.

37 Figes, *Crimea*, 36-37.

38 Kennedy, *Rise and fall*, 170-172.

than bending a weaker neighbour to your will.<sup>39</sup> Aberdeen thus never saw a reason to interfere in the affairs of the Near East so long as the status quo was maintained. Contrastingly, liberals, Palmerston chief amongst them, sought to save the ailing Ottoman Empire by reforming it after liberal models, a modus operandi that Aberdeen found a waste of time as he was deeply contemptuous of the Empire's many faults and considered the attempts at reform equally wasteful, a view that was quite common in Britain. He was affirmed in his belief by the failure of such reforms in the 1830s.<sup>40</sup>

Hence reform was, as far as Aberdeen was concerned, only feasible where the survival of the Ottoman empire was in the balance. Anything else was a waste of time as the reforms would not stick so conserving it in the decrepit state it found itself in was the optimal solution. This might seem a self-defeating train of thought: wanting to preserve the Ottoman Empire on the one hand in order to not upset the balance of power, but not wanting to spend any real effort on changing it structurally so it can be preserved in the first place. As a band aid is to a gunshot, it might stop the bleeding, but it will not fix the damage.

When one views this through the lens of the conservative policy we've observed Aberdeen to have used, it makes just slightly more sense in that it succeeded in fulfilling both main objectives of that policy: to preserve the status quo of the balance to British advantage, because a weakened Ottoman Empire was an easier regional power to work around than Russia or France taking over the region would be, and to do so in the most cost effective way by only investing time and resources in it when absolutely required, essentially keeping the power on for the comatose country. As Aberdeen held that the Ottoman Empire had no redeeming qualities and would fall at a later time, he moved resources and policies towards the end of pushing that date further into the future and nothing more. The foresight of this policy is of course debatable.

This put Aberdeen, again, in direct opposition as Palmerston had begun to view the Empire as salvageable during his own stint in the foreign office in the 1830s. He was also far more suspicious of Russia which, after the Mechemet Ali uprising in 1833, had gained significant freedom in the region via the treaty of Unikar Skelessi, which cemented an alliance between St. Petersburg and the Porte and contained a clause that would compel the Ottomans to close the Straits in times of war. This was considered a major victory for Russia as it gave them a definitive foothold in the south, one Palmerston feared might be used to in due time send the Russian war machine down the straits and into the Mediterranean. The fact that Russia signed another treaty with Austria on the heels of that in which they pledged concerted action in the event of collapse of the empire bolstered the realism of this potential threat.

As mentioned before, the key difference is not really in the vein of liberalism versus conservatism but in the question of whether or not the Ottoman Empire would in the end fall and how one deemed the threat of Russia. Palmerston considered helping the Ottoman Empire to be both a civic duty from an ideological perspective, i.e. spreading the values of liberalism, as well as an investment that could bear fruit when the empire survived. Aberdeen saw the same fruit as Palmerston but perceived it as rotten and considered it not worth the investment, certainly not in a time when Britain was doing all it could to balance the books already. Palmerston considered Russia a likely threat whereas Aberdeen figured the Tsar was not intent on upsetting the conservative balance of power as, ultimately, favoured Russia too.

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39 Figes, *Crimea*, 40.

40 Lane-Poole, *The life of Canning*, 99.

As such Nicholas I, despite being an avowed illiberal autocrat, was man that Aberdeen and the conservatives could work with, provided he was approached with due caution like any Great Power. This often landed them the slander of being overly cosy with the autocrats of the continent, and it is very true that in most things Aberdeen could respect said autocrats and generally got along well with them. But as demonstrated above: Aberdeen did not interfere with other nations internal affairs unless the balance was threatened. The personal conduct of a ruler or the way he treated his subjects had little bearing on that, or so Butcher's framework goes. It should be noted that while Aberdeen could get along fine with authoritarians, he did consider Muslims barbaric and their autocratic rule of Christians misrule by default, having once stated in the House of Lords on the subject of the Ottoman Empire that he had '...seen and known the effect of the barbarous rule existing there and nobody can be more alive to the horrors with which it abounds.'<sup>41</sup> Butcher holds that this is the only topic wherein we can see religious bias affect Aberdeen's foreign relations overtly.<sup>42</sup> Given how lenient he would be on Russia during the Crimean Crisis overall, this might be an oversimplification of the situation.

For all this friendliness towards the Tsar, it has to be remembered here that considerations of rivalry always hung in the background and the potential of the Great Game putting the two powers at odds. But so long as the trade kept flowing and Russia did not do anything demonstrably destabilising of the balance of power (or otherwise interfered with British interests), Aberdeen was happy to live and let live. This did not exclude Aberdeen from taking a firm stance with the near-eastern powers when trade was disrupted due to their bickering in 1844.<sup>43</sup> Here we again see the iron hidden beneath silk.

Another consequence of this attempt at open diplomacy on good terms with Russia, in the spirit of peace and tranquillity, Aberdeen made attempts to mitigate the effects of the Great Game and bury much of the hatched, primarily by ending wars in central Asia, and set upon a policy of signing mutually beneficial trade deals with Russia in the region. It followed the same trend as before: secure British interests, get the money, only reach for your blade when you absolutely need to and otherwise keep the waters still and the pounds rolling.

But the Anglo-Russian diplomatic interaction so often remembered from the 1840s is the meeting between Aberdeen and Nicholas in 1844. The Tsar visited Britain and sought assurances from Aberdeen and the queen that, should the Ottoman Empire fall, there would be concerted action on the matter. While Nicholas was received well at court, his diplomatic mission had a shakier foundation than his personal charisma.

The Tsar wanted to maintain the alliance that had brought Napoleon down decades prior. France was perceived by the Tsar as a bulwark of revolutionary thought, something it would confirm again with the revolutions of 1848, and thus the main antagonist on the continent. Aberdeen held a similar view of France, considering it more of a threat to peace than Russia was. Aberdeen, ever looking for European solutions, reaffirmed with the Tsar that the Ottoman Empire had to be maintained and that *if* it should fall, concerted action would be taken. Aberdeen most likely meant the Concert of Europe acting when he said so.

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41 Hansard, February 1830, col. 415.

42 Butcher, *Aberdeen's foreign policy*, 53.

43 Butcher, *Aberdeen's foreign policy*, 152.

However, it has often been attested that the Tsar may have read more into this than was strictly speaking wise.<sup>44</sup> While the Tsar did leave Britain with a memorandum affirming the cordial relations with the Western power as well as Aberdeen's agreement regarding the Ottoman Empire, this did not entail that Aberdeen would unquestionably back him in the event of a problem in the region, much less that the British government would, as Aberdeen did not control it as the Tsar did his. For that matter, Britain benefited from a weak but alive empire and Aberdeen only backed the Tsar because he thought Russia would not make a move against the Ottomans; a minimalist approach to the problem that did not account for the clashing of two world views on governing.

In this chapter we've examined Aberdeen's ideological underpinning as well as his conduct with regards to foreign policy during the 1840s and held it to the standard that S. Butcher set for it. Thus far, with only minor complaints regarding his interpretation, Butcher's position regarding Aberdeen holds up insofar that there is precious little that actually disproves this alternate explanation of Aberdeen's person; though it bears to consider that Butcher might be stretching it in his efforts to 'de-humanize' Aberdeen and present him as a cold creature of logic. While Butcher often makes a point of bringing up the more personal side of Aberdeen's life, he only connects this to his main narrative in a flimsy way; when rationalizing Aberdeen's mindset, it takes a backseat.

This does not invalidate the framework by any means, as its conclusions are still strong: the man was consistent in upholding the conservative bedrock of the Balance of Power as an extension of upholding British interests, which were favoured by this status-quo, as well as observing Aberdeen's willingness to intercede on behalf of these interests. This intervening spirit was generally more restrained than his liberal contemporaries would like but always with a keen eye for practical British interests and, very much contrary to the 'idyllic' interpretation of Aberdeen: there is plenty of evidence that he was willing to bare his fangs, particularly at France. That he was more restrained *can* be chalked up to Russophilia, but a likelier explanation is that Aberdeen did not want to disrupt the conservative bedrock of the Balance.

Thus far, Aberdeen's 'realpolitik' interpretation holds up for the 1840s. Now we must examine whether this same framework can survive being thrown at the Crimean War.

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44 Figes, *Crimea*, 69-70.

## 2: Conservative foreign policy and the Crimean crisis.

In this chapter we will delve into the intricacies of the Crimean Crisis. Having established, and tested, Butcher's framework in the previous chapter, we must now see if it is compatible with Aberdeen's policy during the 1850s.

### 2.1: Historiography of the Crimean War: an exercise in fluidity.

The Crimean War between Britain, France, Austria and Turkey on the one hand and the Russian empire on the other of 1853 to 1856 has often been described as one of the most pointless wars in European history. The war was, as far as historical consensus so far is concerned, entirely avoidable, the conduct of the war was incompetent at best and the peace settlement was more disruptive to the general health of European international relations than it was good for it. Arguably, the botching of these relations had ramifications that persisted to the present day. As the scope of the Crimean War's theatre came to the public via newspaper and first-hand accounts of veterans, the questions of 'who is to blame?' came to the forefront.

Interestingly, while vilifying Russia would have been quite easy, even logical considering the way the British populace was primed to see the defeated Great Power in a bad light already, the first stone cast came from Britain and was directed at France.<sup>45</sup> In 1863, a scant eight years after the conclusion of hostilities, British writer and parliamentarian A.W. Kingslake published the first of what would become an eight volume long examination of the origins of the war.<sup>46</sup> It is in these works that we first find the enduring analysis that Napoleon III of France had been looking for a fight abroad to bolster his lacking prestige at home. While this was the primary instigator for the war, Russian ambitions to maintain her hegemony in the region were another major component, though by no means the most important.

While some of his assessments have persisted to the present day, it bears mentioning that Kingslake fails to cite any sources and that the work is overflowing with personal anti-French bias as a result of a romantic rivalry between him and Napoleon III.<sup>47</sup>

Despite not being labelled as the belligerent party per se in Kingslake's work, the general tendency of the narrative did prompt Russia to respond with their own perspective on events; though said response suffers from much the same problem as Kingslake's does. The result was *Diplomatic Study on the Crimean War (1852 to 1856)* that appeared in the West in 1874 but had been published in Russia as early as 1863. It was written by A. Jomini, a foreign office member, and placed the blame squarely on France for kickstarting the feud with Russia that would eventually, aided in no small part by the British and Turkish, or so Jomini holds, escalate into the Crimean War; a war Russia had not wanted. As with Kingslake, Jomini cites no sources and his personal loyalties should be an obvious impairment to any form of objectivity. Added to this, considering the remarks the Tsar himself made on the Eastern Question in the years and decades leading up to the conflict, his conclusion that

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<sup>45</sup> For an exhaustive overview of Russophobia in Great Britain, see H. Gleason *The genesis of Russophobia in Great Britain : A study of the interaction of policy and opinion*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1950).

<sup>46</sup> Published under the title *The invasion of the Crimea : its origin, and an account of its progress down to the death of Lord Raglan* volume 1 through 8, published in London between the years 1863 to 1887.

<sup>47</sup> James F. McMillan, *Napoleon III* (London: Longman, 1991), 76.

Russia was fighting to maintain the integrity of the Ottoman Empire is a dubious proposition at best.<sup>48</sup>

A later contribution to the debate, this one originating from the earlier mentioned S. Lane-Poole in 1888, came in the form a biography of Stratford Canning.<sup>49</sup> In this work he proposed the view that British policy, as implemented by Canning, was all in all conciliatory throughout the run-up to the Crimean War and demonstrates this by citing letters and official foreign office documents, some of which are unfortunately lost to us. While this sets his work apart from his predecessors in the best of ways, the coverage is very selective and to take it as 'the whole story' is, again, a dubious position. As this work has already been covered, it would be superfluous to do so again here.

As the debate developed, defence of the French course of action, universally reviled in the early stages of the discussion, did not, ironically, come from France itself. It has been argued that the Crimean War has left little impression on French collective memory as it was soon overshadowed by the Italian campaign of 1959 and the subsequent ventures in that same area in the 1860s, which mind tend towards explaining the minimal coverage.

Instead, the defence came from another Brit: F. A. Simpson's *Louis Napoleon and the Recovery of France, 1848-1856* from 1923 in which he argues that France actually pursued a policy of peace in the Eastern Mediterranean rather than one of war, and that the blame for the war should be found in actions of Canning and Nicholas I primarily for escalating the situation.<sup>50</sup> While a fine addition to the debate if only because it proposes a different viewpoint and makes an attempt to back this view up with evidence, this evidence is not very strong, and Simpson alludes that France was in fact dragged into the war by British machinations, which is patently untrue. Moreover, while France demonstrably did not want the escalated war they eventually got, they did not go into the debacle in good faith. Perhaps the most enduring, and controversial, bit was the introduction of Stratford Canning as 'the bad guy', a notion that would return.

While absolving France of all wrongdoing and placing the blame on Britain is untrue, that does not mean that Britain has not faced domestic criticism for its actions: Kingsley Martins went into the fray in 1924 with his work *The Triumph of Lord Palmerston: A Study of Public Opinion in England before the Crimean War*.<sup>51</sup> In it, he studies the position of lord Palmerston, who has held a myriad of posts throughout his long political career, but is best known as being the Foreign Secretary for much of the 1830s, the Home Secretary during the first three years Crimean War and prime-minister for the last year of it, as well as a subsequent full term after that. The book examines how Palmerston and his fellow hawks influenced the press to nurture the seed of latent Russophobia in British society to grow into a flourishing cry for war, pressuring the prime minister lord Aberdeen into a war he by all accounts did not want.

In *England, Russia and the Straits Question, 1844-1856* of 1931 by V.J. Puryear we see the birth of a narrative that is perhaps familiar to anyone with a cursory knowledge of the subject of the Crimean War: the imperial rivalry of Britain and Russia in Asia as the underlying reason for Britain's harsh

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48 O. Figes, *Crimea: The Last Crusade* (London: Allen Lane, 2010), 68-69.

49 S. Lane-Poole, *The life of Canning* (London, 1888).

50 F. A. Simpson, *Louis Napoleon and the Recovery of France, 1848-1856* (London, 1923).

51 K. Martins, *The Triumph of Lord Palmerston: A Study of Public Opinion in England before the Crimean War* (London: Hutchison & Co., 1924; 1963 edition).

stance with Russia.<sup>52</sup> Puryear spends a great deal of time and attention to the '1844 agreement' between Russia and Britain, which was a secret oral agreement that regarded the shared belief in sustaining the Ottoman Empire were possible, but to also take the possibility of necessary partition into account. This would of course never work out due to imperial rivalries, or so Puryear argues, but it was enough to convince the Tsar that he had British support a small eight years later in 1852 when the Crisis started, which arguably made Russia far bolder than it would have been otherwise.

Additionally, the author also reiterates Simpson's position in that he stresses that Stratford Canning acted without the consent of the British government in pushing the Ottoman's to oppose Russian demands altogether. In this narrative, Britain sets the stage for the Crimean War, as well as being integral to actually getting the drama started, albeit it without malicious intent on both counts, but it was ultimately the mistakes of a few individuals, namely Aberdeen and Canning, that made the difference. In this incompetence is implied on Aberdeen's count, whilst Canning is viewed suspiciously. Whilst the former position is debatable, the latter is simply not supported by the source material, as we shall see below.

However, the view Puryear conceived did gain traction and is echoed somewhat in G.B. Henderson's *The Seymour Conversations, 1853*, published in 1933.<sup>53</sup> In this work, Henderson delves into the mind of Nicholas I in an attempt to reconstruct what the Tsar wanted to achieve in this crisis based on conversations on record. From these conversations, it is gleaned that the Tsar could not ensure British support in the event of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, directly contradicting Puryear. The Tsar did however, or so Henderson argues, infer that the British accepted the 'status quo' and that this status quo included Russian domination over the Ottoman Empire as it was within the Great Power's sphere of influence. This presumption caused a mismatch in what was regarded as acceptable conduct in the region, which eventually blundered into war. In this Henderson emphasizes that neither Russia or Britain were attempting to start a war. The work is, however, very clear in that considers the blundering of the British and the Russian to be major contributors to the outbreak of war: another example of the 'guilt by incompetence' narrative.

This position, so long held, was challenged strongly by Harold Temperley who in *England and the Near East: The Crimea* contended that British policy had been just and deliberate: the preservation of the Ottoman Empire and the prevention of a war in the region that might trigger its collapse.<sup>54</sup> Temperley based his conclusion on an overall broader range of sources than his predecessors, both in time and in place, relying primarily on British policy documents regarding the Ottoman Empire since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as those of other Great Powers. The narrative that evolved from them is clear: while Britain tried to stave off war, it was hardly dragged into the escalating diplomatic crisis by France, its own machinations had brought it there. Furthering this, Canning, reviled as an outlier that acted alone on goading the Ottomans into refusing Russian demands is both vindicated and condemned: it is demonstrated that he acted in accordance with the will of the government when he sought to preserve peace and sought push the Ottomans into at the very least accept the Vienna Notes, which they accordingly refused, triggering the outbreak of war.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, it was clear to Temperley that British policy regarding the Ottoman Empire

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52 V.J. Puryear, 'England, Russia and the Straits Question, 1844-1856' in *University of California Publications in History*, vol. 20 (Berkeley: California University Press, 1931).

53 G.B. Henderson, *The Seymour Conversations, 1853* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1933).

54 H. Temperley, *England and the Near East: The Crimea* (London: Green & Co., 1936).

55 Vienna Notes were attempts by the Concert of Europe to broker compromises that would allow all parties to back out without losing face.



had largely failed and they had a war on their hands to stand as testimony to that fact. Stratford Canning's role in this was not something to be celebrated, nor was Aberdeen's.

This sentiment is echoed by M.S. Anderson in *The Eastern Question, 1774-1923*, published in 1966.<sup>56</sup> In the chapter dedicated to Britain-Russia relations, Anderson posits that a large part of the escalation into war was the tense relations amongst the Great Powers as well as the imperial rivalry between Britain and Russia. Nicholas I had opted to avoid clashes by reaffirming the Vienna settlements spheres of influence and to underline Russia's hegemony in the near-east. Anderson also makes a point of demonstrating that while Russia's diplomacy had brought it to the brink of war, the Ottomans were the ones that declared war on Russia in the end. In the opening moves of the war, Russia sought to wage it defensively, hoping that the conflict might be called off through concerted actions of the Great Powers as the Vienna note had demonstrated that amongst the Great Powers there was a consensus for peace. However, the Russian naval victory at Sinope which decimated the Ottoman fleet triggered public outrage that, at the very least in Britain's case, pushed the country into war on a wave of sentiment, eventually mingling in the war formally as of 1854. While Anderson underlines wherever he can that Britain did not intend for a war to happen, much less take part in one, British public sentiment did force Britain into a position where it escalated the conflict rather than aid in its diffusion. Strike three for the 'guilt by incompetence' narrative regarding the British role in the Crisis.

It is with this build-up that we come to a name some of you might be more familiar with: P.W. Schroeder. His work *Austria, Great Britain and the Crimean War: the destruction of the European Concert* from 1972 doubles down on the position that Britain holds a fair share of the responsibility for the war: Britain's hostility towards Russia and its willingness to decimate her influence in the Near-East as well as her suspicious attitude towards Austria made war near inevitable.<sup>57</sup> In this, Schroeder sets up Palmerston as the main culprit for pushing the diplomatic crisis into war and who's draconic policy regarding it, as both minister and prime-minister, led to a collapse of the Concert of Europe as it had functioned since 1815. Schroeder argues that the key to this was twofold: 1) Palmerston, seeking to increase national prestige and honour in the public eye, both of which became increasingly fragile as the war dragged on under media coverage while victories of note remained absent, sought to not just defeat Russia but been seen doing so and to punish Russia publicly. This caused the war to go on far longer than was needed.

2) Palmerston put immense pressure on Austria, a neutral ally, to confront Russia in the field; a proposition that was suicidal for the much weaker Great Power as well as sure to sour whatever goodwill remained within the conservative Holy Alliance. Austria's sensible refusal of this prompted distrust from Britain, which meant that after the war they turned their back on the ailing Great Power, as did Russia, leaving it to the tender mercies of France and Prussia while also destroying much of the cohesion required for the Concert of Europe to function. We will expand upon this a little in the final section of the thesis.

Schroeder bypasses the fact that Russia exerted a similar pressure on Austria and was diplomatically just as destructive if not more so, so to lay the blame entirely on Britain is overzealous and the lack of the Russian perspective both in source material as well as in narrative is a gaping hole in an otherwise compelling work. Nevertheless, this study paints a Britain not as 'guilty by

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<sup>56</sup> M.S. Anderson, *The Eastern Question, 1774-1923: A Study in International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1966).

<sup>57</sup> P. W. Schroeder. *Austria, Great Britain, and the Crimean War: The Destruction of the European Concert* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972).

incompetence' but outright 'guilty'. That she was not the *only* guilty party does not diminish the severity of that message and again brings into question what it was that Britain wanted to achieve in all of this.

A noticeable problem in the historiography up until this point is that the Ottoman perspective was ignored in favour of a Eurocentric vision. That ended in 1977 with A.P. Saab's *The Origin of the Crimean Alliance*.<sup>58</sup> For this work Saab dove into the archives of multiple Great Powers, unfortunately excluding Russian material, and including the Ottoman Empire. The results reveal an agency in the empire that had up until this point been dismissed: whereas before Ottoman actions were informed seemingly solely by the influences of the 'great players' involved, such as the oft accused Canning, her work shows that the Ottoman Empire had a vibrant war party in its political sphere that was not at all content to lay down meekly before Russian demands or for international diplomacy in the form of the concert. While she blames Nicholas I for the war overall, as his occupation of the principalities forced the Ottomans to act, she points out that there was great enthusiasm for a 'holy war' in the empire and to ignore the Ottomans as players in their own right would be a mistake. This view is later echoed in C. Badem's *The Ottoman Crimean War* of 2010 in an attempt to reinforce this oft neglected view, and it is also picked up in Orlando Figes' *Crimea*.<sup>59</sup>

The notion of Ottoman autonomy sticks to more or lesser extent in that it is never outright ignored any more. This is demonstrated in J.S. Curtiss' *Russia's Crimean War* of 1979 and N. Rich's *Why the Crimean War? A Cautionary Tale* of 1985; they both pick it up again.<sup>60, 61</sup> Both works do take on the legacy of Schroeder in pinning the blame quite firmly on the Western powers, particularly Britain, arguing that Russia was merely fighting to uphold its tangible national interests in the region and sought to do so by maintaining the status quo, which brought her into conflict with the French who challenged that equilibrium. Rich specifically argues that Russia was only opposed because of the West's policy of containment regarding Russia, a view echoed in M. Malia's *Russia Under Western Eyes* of 1999.<sup>62</sup> While Malia is not concerned with the Crimean War itself, the work does illustrate that Russian geopolitical activity was only acceptable to Western powers so long as it aligned with their own, and that Russia was quite quickly relegated to being 'despotic', 'barbaric' or 'Asiatic' as soon as her interests diverged from said West.

In D.M. Goldfrank's 1994 *The Origins of the Crimean War* we see what would become a critical component of the current narrative: the oddness of the war occurring in general.<sup>63</sup> He places the blame firmly on the Russian Tsar, who escalated the conflict into war through bullying diplomacy and thoughtless provocations that left no path but war, even if the Ottomans' stubbornness regarding Russian demands did not help. He stresses, contrary to some of his predecessors, that British role in escalating the conflict was relatively minor. Whilst it was true that Palmerston was actively pushing Britain toward war, Canning was hard at work in the Porte to prevent exactly that. In terms of the blame game, this somewhat vindicated Britain, even if their hands were hardly clean.

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58 Ann Pottinger Saab, *The Origins of the Crimean Alliance* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1977).

59 C. Badem, *The Ottoman Crimean War, 1853-1856* (Brill, 2010).

60 J.S. Curtiss' *Russia's Crimean War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1979).

61 N. Rich, *Why the Crimean War? A Cautionary Tale* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1985).

62 M. Malia, *Russia under western eyes from the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

63 D. M. Goldfrank, *The Origins of the Crimean War* (London: Longman, 1994).

For most of the recent two decades though, the debate regarding the Crimean War has been more or less dominated by A. Lambert's *The Crimean War: British Grand Strategy against Russia, 1853-56*.<sup>64</sup> While originally published in 1990, it has been frequently updated to keep up with the times (the most recent of which was in 2011). It is an outlier most notably for its focus on 1) the Anglo-French alliance and the fragility thereof in the run-up and conduct of the Crimean War (and the political and personal forces at play therein) and 2) that the war, while being undoubtedly a demonstration of the military incompetence of all powers involved when it came to modern warfare, did enable the British to refine their naval strategies and power, and that it was not the fall of Sevastopol that triggered Russian surrender, but the prospect of escalation into total war with an ever expanding British steam powered fleet in a time when the Russian economy was already spent. This has become the accepted view among historians with regards to the military aspects, but 'origin' aspect of it has remained much in the same flux it has remained in for the past twenty years by most estimates.

Barring the earlier mentioned work of Badem, not much of significance has changed in the historiography of the Crimean War as a whole, though O. Figes' *Crimea: the last crusade* of 2010 does make a valiant attempt to shake it up.

This work firmly opposes Goldrank's view that the Crimean War was thought for 'inconsequential symbolic reasons.' Figes argues that the religious significance of the Holy Places and who had a say in what happened there (read: who had the moral and geopolitical authority to exercise hegemony over some of the most important sites in Islam and Christendom) was a very tangible interest in the region. This does not even start on the fact, which I can attest from my own dives into the parliamentary debates of Westminster, is that religion, while seemingly a superfluous concept to the more post-modern mind, was a deeply important issue for statesmen and world leaders personally so the relevance cannot be dismissed out of hand. Aberdeen himself was informed on more than one occasion by his detesting of Islam. Figes does perhaps *overstate* the religious relevance, as his work seems to focus so much on the religious aspect of the conflict that it seems to gloss over the more geopolitical and diplomatic aspects: between the failure of Russia's first volley of diplomatic action in march in the form of the Menshikov mission and the outbreak of war in October rest several months of intense diplomatic struggle, compromise and personal battles. Figes, rather than remark upon much of this, passes the time with observations of religious sentiments in Russia and the Balkans, troop compositions. This is logical when one considers that Figes holds Tsar Nicholas I as the person 'most guilty of the Crimean War' and all these factors did influence him a lot, so this by no means to say that the religion-centric view is in any way 'incorrect', but it does generate a narrative that is, I would argue, incomplete.

Thus the historiography of the Crimean War shows a clear trajectory from pinning the blame firmly on the Western powers, to a more nuanced view, toward now seeming to end up on the other spectrum with Russia being pinned as the main aggressor. In this we also clearly see a divergence between the debate on Aberdeen, which still pins many flaws and blame on his person, whereas the debate on the Crimean War has moved well beyond that scope. In the next portion we will discuss the Crimean Crisis and Aberdeen's role therein in an attempt to reconcile these two perspectives.

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64 A. Lambert's *The Crimean War: British Grand Strategy against Russia, 1853-56* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

## 2.2: The Coalition is formed.

Aberdeen came to power on the back of the collapse of the Derby administration after it had existed for little under five months. It was an outcome that surprised exactly no one; the administration was a minority government that only existed by virtue of the liberals bickering amongst themselves and the Peelites opted to see how the protectionist Derbyites would approach issues such as free trade.<sup>65</sup> Their disunity allowed for brief survival.

The ideological opposition was one cause of its downfall, the other was its lack of skilled and notable manpower to execute any policy. A near deaf member of the House of Lords gave the cabinet its enduring nickname by responding with 'who? Who?' to the list of inexperienced cabinet members as it was presented to the House by reading them out loud, not recognizing the names or not hearing them. The barb stung either way.

The following elections gave the Liberals the largest number of seats, but not enough for a majority. Added to this, John Russel, their leader, was not in full control of his affiliated party as his previous government had fallen under unfortunate circumstances prior to the ascension of the Derby administration. Recognizing he could not lead them again and requiring support to form a coalition in the first place, he turned to Aberdeen. As we've addressed above, to place Aberdeen far away from liberal views is unjust based on his letters with Princess Lieven, and his correspondence with Russel demonstrated this again.<sup>66, 67</sup> After much negotiation, the Aberdeen coalition was born in December 1852. Amongst its members it included many experienced and influential politicians, most importantly for our narrative here being John Russel (secretary of foreign affairs until February 1853 after which he became a minister without portfolio. Throughout he would remain leader in the house of commons), George Villiers, 4<sup>th</sup> earl of Clarendon (1800-1870, who would take over the office of foreign affairs from Russel, an important position during the Crimean crisis naturally) and viscount Palmerston (secretary of state for the home department). It should be noted here that considering all the time we have dedicated previously to the Palmerston-Aberdeen dichotomy that Palmerston's entry into the coalition as a part of the liberals was smooth and he did not rock the boat much until well into the Crimean Crisis. Instead, it was lord Russel, leader of the liberals currently, who demonstrated the greatest test of strength for Aberdeen as the man was prickly at best and embodied Whiggism both in their tribal mentality as well as in their fierce patriotism and sense of honour. Both clashed with the more moderate and flexible Aberdeen.<sup>68</sup>

While the strength of this cabinet in terms of output cannot be doubted, many at the time and since have wondered whether it was wise to put all these headstrong people, with age old disagreements on policy, together under the watchful eye of a man who was generally regarded as an apolitical figure of perpetual disinterest. Yet, this combined with his general open-minded approach to people and governing as well as the fact that he carried the respect of next to all his peers Aberdeen was

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65 Conversely, 'liberalism' in 19th century British context generally referred to the politics which favoured free trade and enterprise as well as as the notion of fundamental rights and the value of democratic institutions (though what constituted as democracy was quite a bit more limited than what we would consider democracy now). 'Peelites' on the other hand were often referred to as 'liberal conservatives' in that they adhered to conservative stances on most issues, but took a liberal approach to matters of trade, and often taxation. Finally, 'Debyrites' were more conventional conservatives who were more inclined toward protectionism and supporting 'landed interest' over the interests of entrepreneurs.

66 Parry, *Correspondence*, 12.

67 Conacher, *The Aberdeen Coalition*, 40.

68 Conacher, *The Aberdeen Coalition*, 39-40

perhaps, as Conacher argues, the only person that could have possibly held these people together at all. The cabinet pulled together well throughout 1852, and its domestic achievements are well documented, though the coalition is not remembered for them; it is remembered for the Crimean Crisis and subsequent war.

However, a passing examination of the domestic issues must be considered: above I have argued, in the spirit of Butcher, that Aberdeen's foreign policy was dominated by his inspirations from Pitt, Castlereagh and Peel. While the internationalist influences of Pitt and particularly Castlereagh are well documented in Aberdeen's approach to the Crimean Crisis, one might justifiably question whether Peelite economic influences still held sway over the Earl. I do not believe the financial prospects of war were of particular importance to Aberdeen in this instance, at least no more than considerations of war generally affect one's economic worries; as we've discussed above, the economic significance of hindered access to India was always a consideration that even Aberdeen had to content with. However, our position that Aberdeen's foreign policy has been misjudged relies on consistency through time of his 'conservative foreign policy', hence we must at the very least demonstrate that the economic implications of said policy still mattered to Aberdeen, even if it is not particularly significant to the crisis.

I believe Aberdeen himself said it best in his ministerial address December 27, 1852: 'But, my Lords, the great object of Her Majesty's present Government, the great characteristic of that Government, and the mission with which they are peculiarly entrusted, is the maintenance and the prudent extension of free trade, and the commercial and financial system established by the late Sir Robert Peel.'

Adding later that

'In our financial system, my Lords, a difficulty —a crisis, I would almost say—will necessarily arise, by the early cessation of a very large branch of the revenue. That must necessarily be supplied; and doubtless it will tax the ingenuity and ability of all those who are concerned in this undertaking to accomplish that great work according to the principles of justice and equity.'<sup>69</sup>

Herein reaffirming his loyalty to Peel's ideas as well as expressing policy aims to ensure a balanced budget. This is of course hardly surprising, considering that budgets always require balancing, but it must be stressed here that British aversion to taxation is well documented, and in an era in which there was no war to compel higher taxes they had been getting lower and lower as the decades went on. Tinkering with them was not a foregone conclusion.<sup>70</sup> And, of course, a resolution in the House does not a policy make. That job would be left to William Gladstone (1809-1898), the Chancellor of the Exchequer. A Peelite, his first budget, which was a work of brilliance by all accounts, had some controversial points in it, such as an increase to income tax as opposed to property tax.

Mostly, the bill liberalized trade further, aiming to pair tax reductions on the one hand with an expected increase in revenue via trade. Naturally this banked a lot on the stability of world trade, perhaps a background consideration to Aberdeen in later times, adding extra pressure. The bill faced

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69 Hansard, 27 December 1852, column 1725.

70 Conacher, *The Aberdeen Coalition*, 58.

some serious opposition within the cabinet, even if initial impression had been positive and Gladstone managed to convince them all after a few concessions. Aberdeen was not one of his opponents, although he did have some misgivings regarding the expansion of the income tax. Regardless, he responded to criticism from others in the cabinet that they had set out to 'expand upon Peel's work' and to stray too far from that would not do.<sup>71</sup> Given that this budget would later go to the Commons with the backing of the full cabinet but with the caveat that rejection would mean resignation or dissolution of the cabinet, it strongly suggests Aberdeen's commitment to the ideals of Peel. As such, we can safely infer that Aberdeen had remained true to one of his mentors. In what ways he remained true to the other two, we must discuss below.

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<sup>71</sup> Conacher, *The Aberdeen Coalition*, 68.

### 2.3: The Crisis begins.

As we've already covered the position of the Ottoman Empire with regards to the balance of power in Europe it would be superfluous to regale the problem of the Eastern Question again, though it of course lies at the heart of the Crimean Crisis. Instead, we must discuss the direct forces that got the ball rolling into the direction of war and how this escalated from a diplomatic conflict into a military one. In the paragraph thereafter, we will discuss Aberdeen's position in this process through the lens of conservative foreign policy as we have established in the previous chapter.

As mentioned, Russia historically had the tendency to be deeply concerned with the fate of Christians under the Ottoman Empire. While a less generous soul, as many contemporaries in the 1840s were, might dismiss this as simply a pretext for imperialist behaviour, defending Christendom was a large part of the Tsars legitimacy and often a cornerstone upon which they could build positive public sentiment from the Russian population.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, as far as the actual founding of Russia, its Christian identity had been at the forefront, narratively portraying itself as the 'Third Rome'. This religious overtone, combined with the nationalistic sentiments on the rise in the 19<sup>th</sup> century placed faith at the heart of the nation, and this extended to policy as well. Russia had historically fought many wars for the sake of Christendom, from their struggle against the Mongol Golden Horde to their many wars with the Ottomans, religion was always a motivator (that these struggles coincided with massive territorial expansion and other geopolitical gains didn't hurt). The oppression of Christians under the Ottomans, specifically their restriction of access to places sacred to their respective denominations of Christianity in the Holy Land was thus something that the Tsars took to heart, as was the fate of millions of Christians that lived under Ottoman hegemony in the Balkans.<sup>73</sup>

But as outright annexing these areas was both unfeasible, because it would bring the wrath of all the Great Powers down on Russia, and undesirable. Russia instead tried to mingle ever further into the religious affairs of the Ottoman Empire and wring concessions from it, a venture she was by and large successful, rendering Russia the dominant force in the region. That is until France also stepped in.

Catholic interest groups in France claimed that the French had a historic relationship with the region, going back as far as the crusades. While the legitimacy of this relationship is questionable at best, it was a pretext for Napoleon III to step in. Napoleon became the French president in 1848 on the back of a revolution that deposed the monarchy that had been established as part of the Vienna settlement. As in 1830, the shift back to liberalism had the Concert of Europe eyeing France wearily; Aberdeen was certainly no exception to this. Though on both occasions the most reactionary power (Russia) was preoccupied with Poland while Britain had not bothered for various reasons. The alarm was greater when, in 1852, the second French Republic transformed via referendum into the Second French Empire. Britain drew up battle plans and recalled its fleet to strategic positions, Austria demanded an immediate notification that France was in fact not out for war and Russia promised to field up to 60.000 troops in case France sought to revise the Vienna settlement any further.<sup>74</sup>

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72 Figes, *Crimea*, 9-10.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid., 101-102.

While Napoleon III played off these worries, declaring that their intentions were peaceful, the weariness of the other Powers was not without merit, obviously. It has to be noted that Napoleon's election and popularity mostly rested on his connection to France's extraordinary performance on the global stage under his uncle's rule. The new emperor could not capitalize on this by being idle, but the Vienna settlement and the suspicions of the other powers ruled out any European adventures in the direct future. Napoleon needed a victory to keep his momentum going and the question of the Holy Places granted him an opportunity that was hard to pass up. The same special interest groups that had noted the French connection to the Catholics of the Ottoman Empire now pushed Napoleon for action and seeing as it was on the fringes of Europe, he could perhaps get away with it. Most importantly, the fight was with Nicholas I, the gendarme of Europe. In 1812 the Russians had pushed the first French Empire into an early grave that paired with the occupation of Paris by Russian forces in the twilight of the Napoleonic Wars was a source of great national shame. Uniting a fractured country after the civil unrest of the previous years by picking a fight with a country that was already public enemy number one in the public mind while also satisfying the special interest groups at home *and* clawing France back to a dominant position on the continent; it was from all angles an attractive piece of fruit to pluck.<sup>75</sup>

This might also have the added benefit of breaking up the alliance that had kept France down in the first place: Britain was steadily liberalizing more and thus a potential ideological partner, whereas Russia was generally tolerated rather than welcomed. Conflict with Russia, even if only diplomatic, might drive a real wedge between Russia and Britain that France could exploit.<sup>76</sup> Added to this, due to conflicting interests in the Balkans, it might also well drive a similar wedge between Austria and Russia. In this regard especially France succeeded, as Schroeder expands upon in his work *Austria, Great Britain and the Crimean War: the destruction of the European Concert*. The collapse of the Concert and Vienna settlement primarily benefited France.

For all these reasons it made sense for France to make the attempt, even if in hindsight it was quite a reckless gambit. As such France started to pressure the Porte into giving Catholics in the region more rights, simultaneously increasing French influence in the region while also directly challenging Russia. When the Ottomans gave in to the demands Russia was positively livid.<sup>77</sup> The potential for ideological damage to the Tsarist worldview as the protectors of Christendom was enormous, as well as the practical problems that came with a lessening influence in the region. And, of course, it was liberal France at it once again, undermining the peace of Europe. On all fronts a threat Russia could not ignore, and the Tsar took drastic actions from the start.

Russia responded by mobilizing troops immediately and drafted up plans for the partition of the empire in late 1852, giving a share to all powers involved, be it in the form of land or privilege, in accordance with the balancing principle. Whether or not this was something that the Tsar wanted to go through with or just a scare tactic is up for debate. It is quite apparent from many statements, both those for public consumption and made in privacy with his ministers and officers, that the Tsar was perfectly willing to sound the final bell for the Ottoman Empire, but studies into the subject have revealed that such resolutions were not consistent over time.<sup>78, 79</sup> Perhaps the most well known

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75 Bartlett, *Peace, war*, 55-58.

76 Figes, *Crimea*, 104.

77 We must remember from Saab's contribution to the debate that this was at least in part due to confrontational factions within the Ottoman Empire itself, not just due to France's pressure.

78 Figes, *Crimea*, 105-106.



of these are the 'Seymour Conversations' that he held with the British ambassador, in which the Tsar referred to the Ottoman Empire as a 'sick man' for whose imminent death arrangements had to be made.

Notwithstanding, the Tsar did give diplomacy a chance, albeit a poor one. As many have noted, the fact that the Tsar send prince Alexander Menshikov as his envoy to the Porte was evidence of that. Menshikov was not a diplomat, quite the opposite: he was an aging admiral man, a veteran of many conflicts, including with the Ottoman Empire. This choice of envoy was not just dubious, but also dangerous. Should negotiations fail, Menshikov could call upon thousands of men and place himself at the head of them quite hastily. Though it never quite came to that, the implicit threat was clear enough.

Menshikov went up and beyond the call of duty when it came to meeting the nervous, and low, expectations of the other Powers involved in the diplomatic conflict. The man had little regard for proper code of conduct, disrespected his peers to the point of blatantly ignoring them in full view of crowds, bullied and threatened as well as attempted to bribe the Ottomans and refused to proceed with negotiations in any sense until the Ottomans dismissed their current foreign minister and install someone more agreeable to the Russian cause instead (ironically he championed a replacement that was not amenable to Russian causes at all and he was seemingly unaware of this).

While the Porte was accommodating of most of these requests and tolerated the breaches of decorum, the message sent was an overwhelmingly negative one. But, as stated above, Menshikov did not act like this one a whim though: he did as ordered by the Tsar.<sup>80</sup> His instructions clearly stated that he was not to bend on any issue and be ready to next to anything to force the Ottomans into giving in to Russian demands. A problematic aspect of these demands is that they were far more encompassing than what was considered just: rather than just returning to the previous status quo, the demands would create extra rights for orthodox Christians in the empire as well as give Russia great leeway to infringe upon Ottoman sovereignty regarding them. While most powers conceded that Russia's demand for France to back down and to reverse recently passed legislation that favoured only Catholics were just, these extra demands were not considered legitimate.

The British responded by pulling Stratford Canning out of resignation to resume his post as ambassador to Constantinople. He had lain down said post in January 1853, only to be brought back a month later. While not Aberdeen's preferred choice, he was a rather prideful and outspoken person, the man was by far the most experienced tool that the prime minister had in the shed when it came to these matters.<sup>81</sup> However, contrary to Canning's desires, Aberdeen refused him the option of being capable of calling up the fleet should things escalate. Aberdeen's thoughts on the matter were quite clear: he detested the Ottomans and did not trust them with the knowledge that they had British backing, and whether that was the case was still up for debate, for that would give them an incentive to escalate matters and that would force Britain into war. To quote Aberdeen directly from February 1853:

'The assurances of prompt and effective aid on the approach of danger, given by us to the Porte, would in all probability produce war. These barbarians hate us all and would be delighted to take their chance of some advantage, by embroiling us with the other powers of Christendom.'<sup>82</sup>

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79 Lambert, *Grand strategy*, 37.

80 Figez *Crimea*, 108.

81 Conancher, *The Aberdeen Coalition*, 144-145.

82 *Aberdeen Correspondence 1852-1855*, pp. 15, 15<sup>th</sup> of February 1853.

Aberdeen wanted to keep the ability to trigger a war to be kept as close to the chest as possible, even if that meant depriving Canning of some of his leverage in negotiating a diplomatic outcome for the crisis.

Whilst Canning was travelling to Constantinople, France did not sit idly by. In response to Menshikov's seemingly outrageous demands, delivered on march 16<sup>th</sup>, France mobilized its fleet and sent it east, presuming on British backing.<sup>83</sup> It was a gamble that did not pay off at all. While Palmerston and Russel were more than willing to respond by joining in the endeavour, the rest of the cabinet, particularly Clarendon and Aberdeen, were worried that such a move would escalate the situation. Above that, Russia had only sabre rattled in the face of what was to many a justified infringement of their affairs by France. In the eyes of the cabinet, France was still the greater threat here.<sup>84</sup>

This interaction perfectly exemplifies some of the core dynamics in this Crisis: Russia pushing, France preparing to leap all in while Britain hangs back, leaving both France and Russia in the dark as to where Britain really stands. France was aware that should push come to shove, it would be in Britain's interest to join them.<sup>85</sup> However, Tsar Nicholas also had at this point reason to believe in Britain's goodwill on account of the memorandum he took home with him from his previous state visit, as well as his amicable ties with their prime-minister lord Aberdeen. For now, Britain would put its money on Canning working out a diplomatic solution.

Stratford Canning's arrival in Constantinople is often seen as something of a turning point. Rather than solely being on the defensive, the Ottoman's now felt backed enough to genuinely put up opposition to Russian demands. As mentioned in the historiography section, he is a controversial figure. Some claim he acted in full support of the Ottomans, emboldening him where Aberdeen had explicitly told him that doing so would be dangerous, while others argue that this influence is overstated and he merely acted exactly as he was instructed by London prior to his departure.

There is some truth to both sides. As Saab and Badem demonstrated, the Ottomans did not lack fighting spirit; they were of a similar cloth as the Russians when it came to this conflict in that they viewed it as an ideological struggle rather than just a geopolitical one.<sup>86</sup> It would be disingenuous to blame Canning for finding listening ears and trigger-happy fingers waiting for him. That said, Canning did in fact bolster Ottoman opposition to the Russian demands by promising that the British fleet would help if it was needed, a promise he had no authority to make and one that may well have made the already warlike Ottomans ever rasher.

Until such time that the conflict escalated completely though, Stratford was of the opinion that the Russian demands were far to encompassing and advised the Porte to limit the scope: respond only to Russia's legitimate claims regarding the holy places and Christian access thereof as well as revise France's undue influence, but reject all other notions, as they essentially turn the empire into a Russian dependency. By May 5<sup>th</sup> the dispute regarding the holy places had calmed, but Russia's additional claims were still refuted. Menshikov revised the proposed treaty in response and it must be said that this was in a convoluted way a gesture for peace, as his instructions clearly indicated that he was allowed to give no quarter and he knew that he could summon Russia's military might in

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83 Figes, *Crimea*, 112.

84 Ibid., 110.

85 Ibid., 112.

86 Both Saab and Figes refer to this point.

the event of non-compliance. The convoluted part comes from the fact that the treaty still stood no chance of being signed overall. Russia did take a step back in the degree to which she could meddle in the affairs of the Ottoman Empire but did not drop the other demands in the list nor did they drop the verbal demand for an alliance similar to that of the treaty of Unkar Skelessi, an earlier significant treaty with the Porte that had expired a decade ago, that was not listed.

The new demands came with a steep deadline that left only days for it to be signed. While the terms were still quite harsh, the British home-front, having received a communique with the proposals, responded to the revisions with mixed receptions. On the one hand, many considered the terms quite harsh still, while some were agreeable. Above all, the infringements on the Ottoman Empire as supposed in the revised offer were not deemed to be worth a European-wide war. Regardless, both the Ottomans refused to budge, partially because the terms effectively formalized the weaker position of the Ottomans as well as formal loss of control over a significant portion of their subjects. While the Porte was willing to accept both on an informal basis, it had little choice given its relative lack of power, formalizing it was out of the question. Thus after a month of failed negotiations, Menshikov leaves Constantinople without fulfilling his mission on the 21<sup>st</sup> of May, 1853.

## 2.4: The crisis escalates.

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of May the Tsar wrote to his field marshal that this failed mission left him with no other option than the military one. He would seize the principalities, inspire rebellions in the Ottoman empire and strongarm the cooperation of the other great powers, especially Austria, as he felt that with the direct support of another great power in the region he would be untouchable, and have the Turks crumble slowly without ever having to send his ships south; unless of course the Ottomans gave into his demands.

Nicholas was intent upon creating a situation where either the Porte bled out or yielded by using the very real threat of war as a bargaining tool; all roads leading to victory.<sup>87</sup> While all-out war was not in the Tsar's best interests as he still feared the interference of the Western powers, he accurately surmised that they would try their utmost to prevent a war and would sooner pressure the Ottomans in conceding than to risk war with Russia. Retrospectively we can see that this line of thinking ran into the same problem that many historians have run into when writing on this topic: ignoring the agency of the Ottoman Empire, for it would be they who would eventually declare war that end of this.

But that time was not now. Now was the time for Russia to mobilize and occupy the principalities, as he ordered at the end of May (though the actual occupation itself would only occur on the second of June) paired with an ultimatum to the Porte to accept Russian demands if they wanted to stop this conflict. Now, while the Danubian principalities were under Ottoman suzerainty, hence occupying them under the pretext of securing Christian was not technically an invasion, the act was still extremely divisive in terms of how the other Great Powers responded to the Tsar's stated intent. Most relevant to our discussion are Austria and Britain.

Austria, as mentioned previously, took issue with the ruckus going on in its backyard. Tsar Nicholas presumed upon Austria's help due to past treaties and his aid to Austria during the revolutions of 1848-1849, a period of social revolutions throughout Europe, mostly for the sake of liberalism. During this time, the Austrian Habsburgs were facing a threat not unlike the Bourbons had faced in France during the French Revolution. Or they would have, had Russia not interceded on their behalf, thus creating, in the Tsar's mind, a debt to Russia for saving Austria. But upon cashing this debt during the run-up to the Crimean War he wilfully ignored the protests of emperor Franz Joseph (1830-1916).<sup>88</sup> The Austrian empire had no gains to make by disrupting the status quo, and any likely outcome of the current conflict looked to be a poor deal for them:

1. They could get a European War on their hands in which they would have to maintain their neutrality, as their military weakness did not allow them to engage with any significance with the other great powers.<sup>89</sup>
2. Alternatively, Russia would succeed in strong-arming the Ottomans and they would then have to deal with an emboldened Russia brushing closer to their sphere of influence, if not outright expand into it; an eventuality that was both superfluous and highly dangerous. Russia already had de facto hegemony over the principalities, and inciting revolutions against the Ottomans by the orthodox Christians in the region might well spread to *Austria's* orthodox subjects.<sup>90</sup>

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87 Figes, *Crimea*, 146-147.

88 B. Jevlich, *Moscow and saint Petersburg* (London: India University Press, 1974), 118.

89 Kennedy, *Rise and fall*, 162.

90 Schroeder, *Austria and Great Britain*, 42-43.

3. The impression in Austria generally was that the Ottomans, while abhorrent, did a good job of keeping the different volatile ethnic groups of the Balkans under control. Austria feared that pushing the Ottomans out would leave the Balkans as a patchwork of states and group, all as troublesome to deal with as recently liberated Greece had proven to be.<sup>91</sup>

None were prospects that the fragile empire was capable of handling. This disinclination of the Austrians to fall in line with Russia's plans is important to note, as while the Tsar's *advisors* tended to have a slightly more informed perception of the issues that the Habsburg empire faced, they neglected to inform the Tsar of this and he himself was of the conviction that Austria would back him in his claims because they owed him and that Russia stood to win the diplomatic conflict because of that support. We can safely say, with the benefit of hindsight, that such a line of thinking was a huge distortion of reality.

Britain's position with regards to the failure of the Menshikov mission was less existential in nature than Austria, but there were definite political consequences: upon news of the failure, anti-Russian sentiment and war enthusiasm skyrocketed under the British populace.<sup>92</sup> This anti-Russian sentiment was the result of many different things, with the current state of affairs being merely a catalyst for underlying issues. For one, Britain had not been in any major conflict since Napoleon and so the memory of its horrors had faded with time. The illiberal 'gendarme of Europe' seemed to be the perfect opponent to valiantly take up arms against. Furthering this, as Kingsley Martin and Orlando Figes argue, the lobby groups and popular perception of Hungarian and Polish refugees in Britain also had a major effect on the swaying of the public and many politicians to hop onto the Russophobe bandwagon.<sup>93</sup>

This public outcry bolstered the influence of politicians willing to dance to its tune, such as Palmerston and Russel, while politicians like Aberdeen were confronted with an extra dose of pressure. Palmerston in particular was anti-Russian and of the believe that the Ottomans were reforming along liberal lines via way of the Tanzimat reforms from 1839 to 1876. Hence, seeing as this willingness to change their ways cancelled out arguments that the Ottomans were merely Asiatic barbarians, they needed to be defended from Russia's infringements on their sovereignty. For his part, Russel argued that the fleet should be sent up to the Dardanelles, while Palmerston urged to take the fleet even further, all the way to the straights; in violation of international treaties on the matter. Aberdeen was of a different opinion. He still saw no saving grace in the Ottoman empire, dismissing Palmerston's views that Turkey was 'more civilized' in some ways than Russia, and did not perceive the threat of Russia's occupation of the principalities, or the ultimatum, as an act of war.<sup>94</sup> Furthering this, he found Palmerston's proposals specifically ludicrous and dubbed them as 'half measures', as they would be taken as an act of aggression and likely incite war, while at the same time still leaving the fleet far enough away to actually be effective when the incited war ensued as a result; the worst of both worlds.<sup>95</sup>

Conacher considers this sentiment curious, as Aberdeen generally seemed so eager to avoid war. And yet, here he seemed perfectly willing to commit to an even more aggressive policy than

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91 Ibid., 45.

92 Martins, *The Triumph of Lord Palmerston*, 100-107.

93 Ibid and Figes, *Crimea*, 78-84.

94 Conacher, *The Aberdeen Coaliton*, 149.

95 *Aberdeen Correspondence 1852-1855*, pp. 125-126, 31<sup>st</sup> of May 1853.

Palmerston suggested. This is difficult to reconcile with the conventional view of Aberdeen as discussed in the historiographic section of this paper, but if we consider it in the light of our revised frame of reference regarding liberal conservative foreign policy, it makes perfect sense: Aberdeen was not willing to commit to any policy that would start a war, as those tended to not pan out well for either side, would reduce British prestige and agency in the international sphere, and disrupt the flow of trade; all things Aberdeen had demonstrably striven to avoid in the past. However, in the event that Russia were to break her commitments to the international community and take a stance opposed to British interests, then Aberdeen would be perfectly willing to call in the fleet and force the issue, something he has a precedent with when we look at the Moroccan crisis of 1844, during which France had been expanding its influence in the Mediterranean. It is little wonder then, that Palmerston's suggestion of acting to incentivize Russia into war before it was certain that the Tsar had taken a stance against British interests were received with such derision by Aberdeen.

Demonstrating this, Aberdeen is on record stating that he did not believe the Tsar was acting in bad faith but, in the event that he was, then 'the case is altered.'<sup>96</sup> Aberdeen most definitely had drawn some lines in the sand, he just did not think that Russia had crossed them yet. Aberdeen did concede to give Stratford Canning the authority to call up the fleet as Clarendon had been sufficiently swayed over the last months by Palmerston and Russel to outvote him on the issue.<sup>97</sup> British policy overall was unchanged however: Canning was to push for moderation and a diplomatic solution. Conacher notes that one of the motivations for this move was to satisfy public opinion and takes it to mean that the cabinet was not in a strong position politically and thus had to score some easy headlines.

It was only when they received word from Canning that Aberdeen could be persuaded to go one step further and allow the moving of the fleet to the Aegean. Still, he conferred clear instructions that Canning was only to call up the fleet defensively, as doing otherwise would make them the aggressor and foreclose all possibility of a European solution, a position he would hold enduringly.

Henceforth Aberdeen would focus his political weight on procuring for the Tsar a means by which to extradite himself from the conflict without losing face. While his cabinet was still for the most part behind him in this regard, he expressed worry over the Ottomans and Stratford. There was every chance that either they, or their ambassador, would view the imminent occupation of the principalities as an act of war, which would offer Stratford an excuse to call up the fleet and drag Britain into said war, all while Aberdeen himself considered it far too early to even consider such a rash thing.

Hence Aberdeen found himself in a situation that was contrary to everything he had spent the better part of two decades fighting for: international relations in Europe were strained where he preferred amicably resolving issues. War seemed imminent, with all the horrors that entailed (his experiences with the wasteful horror of the Napoleonic wars so many years earlier had left a deep impression on him), as well as seeming utterly unnecessary in his eyes as it was fought to preserve an empire he did not care for (which could not even be saved from its own faults) and it would cost Britain an enormous amount of wealth and goodwill while giving them next to nothing to show for it. And, last but not least, he had been pressured by his cabinet and popular opinion into giving up the power to make this decision to Canning, not the most level-headed person by all accounts, and the Ottomans, who had every reason to use the *carte blanche* that Britain was giving them.

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96 Conacher, *The Aberdeen Coaliton*, 151.

97 Lambert, *Grand strategy*, 44.

It was a relief then, that Canning was not the man Aberdeen had feared he was. Even before receiving his instructions from the cabinet to act with restraint, Stratford urged the Ottomans to let the occupation of the principalities slide. The Ottomans acted more in line with the prime-minister's expectations though: while they did not outright declare war on Russia over the principalities, neither did they engage with the Tsar's demands, which brought the crisis to the stalemate the Tsar had envisioned.

As the British fleet moved east the debates in London raged on as mentioned above, with Russel and Palmerston urging for policies that would likely incite war, whilst Aberdeen wished to abort such actions immediately and seek a diplomatic solution. Palmerston, for his part, continued to opt for a demonstration of naval force and to pressure Russia into backing down, declaring that to refuse to do so would be 'dangerous to the balance of power and to the security of the other states of Europe'.<sup>98</sup> Russel was of a similar, albeit slightly more moderate, conviction. Aberdeen forestalled both this though, as his own closing contribution to the debate was that the cabinet had already sent the fleet away and that they had already sent instructions to Canning in Constantinople, both of which were the same: do not incite war. To suggest an altered policy now was to dismiss the governments already chosen course: not the question of how to incite war but how to maintain peace. Russel, in response to this, backed down and opted to work with Aberdeen on the endeavour.

Clarendon spent a part of his time securing the support of Austria in seeking a diplomatic solution as Aberdeen hoped, which was not that difficult as both Great Powers were united in their position regarding the Eastern question. This would allow them to use Austria as a bridge between Russia and the west, allowing for a diplomatic retreat. Palmerston wanted a variation of this policy, in that he desired to invite all the powers (except Russia) to the London conference and have them sign an agreement that they would support the status quo of the Ottoman empire. While seemingly desiring the same thing as Aberdeen in the grand scheme of things, it was not. The locale of London and the initiative being of Britain, the hypothetical meeting would place Britain in a leading position regarding the Eastern Question. Simultaneously, it would isolate Russia in much the same way that the Vienna settlement isolated France, and in so doing would pit the three powers of the Holy alliance against each other. It should be clear at this point that Palmerston was constantly trying to undermine the Holy Alliance, had been for decades if one considers the Quadruple Alliance of 1834 between Britain, France, Spain and Portugal, which Palmerston had set-up in an attempt to counterbalance the three continental autocrats. While Clarendon embraced the notion Palmerston suggested, perhaps on account of his inexperience, it fell flat on convincing all other parties involved. That Clarendon's ambivalence on the matter should so swiftly shift is an apt demonstration of how fragile Aberdeen's position, reliant on Clarendon's support, really was.<sup>99</sup>

Needless to say, Aberdeen was of a different conviction. Aberdeen consistently called for European entente on most issues and strove to keep Britain out of the internal affairs of other nations. While the Eastern Question was hardly just internal, committing to such an extent to it would be against his personal beliefs in foreign policy. But perhaps more than that, even as he did not enjoy the darker sides of autocracy in Europe, Aberdeen had a healthy respect for the threat of revolution, and by extension for the stabilizing power of having the balance of power sway towards the conservative

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<sup>98</sup> Conacher, *The Aberdeen Coalition*, 156.

<sup>99</sup> Lambert, *Grand strategy*, 44; Lambert suggests that part of Palmerston's success in swaying the cabinet was because he recognized the younger Clarendon as impressionable and took him under his wing.

end of the spectrum. Recall, Aberdeen's key foreign policy objectives was to maintain the peace, both as an ideological imperative as well as a practical end so that trade would not be hampered, and the books would remain balanced. He would only break with this if British interests were directly threatened. Preserving the balance was one such interest as the balance currently one that tipped towards Britain precisely because it had been tailored to do so.

Disrupting it by undermining the conservative bedrock upon which it rested would at a glance seem a victory for liberalism, as Palmerston undoubtedly perceived it, but ultimately it would not be a victory for Britain, but for France. After all, it was the unity of the Vienna settlement that checked French ambition on the continent, and this 'old' settlement of 1815 was kept aloft mostly by the conservative Powers. If a wedge could be driven in the Holy Alliance, it would unchain France; a far stronger adversary than Russia could ever hope to be. Undermining the bedrock of the balance was thus not at all likely to pan out to Britain's advantage whereas the current system was. Hence Aberdeen, rather than being overly fond of peace or of the Russians, was taking a stance to preserve British interests in the long run by preserving the status quo. This is the logical conclusion of Butcher's framework and so far it seems to be as in line with Aberdeen's pursued policy during the 1850s as it had been during the 1840s.

For now, Aberdeen had his cabinet under control, as he could consistently outmanoeuvre Palmerston and in particular keep Clarendon and Russel in favour of more diplomatic solutions. But his hold was precarious and became ever more so as public opinion upped the pressure. Aberdeen's temporary security did little to resolve the impending crisis though, for so far there was every indication that Russia would ignore the warning signs and proceed. At best, Aberdeen had bought time, but the pressure only increased when Russia went through with its plans and occupied the Danubian principalities on the second of July. This of course prompted all Powers to ready their armed forces, either to intercede on behalf of the Ottomans in the case of France and Britain or to stave off any bright ideas of rebellion as a result of the changed situation in the case of Austria. Prussia did not care. After several ultimatums back and forth between the concerned parties, a Great Power conference in Vienna was called to settle the dispute.

The Vienna talks that started in late July functioned, in a way, as a compromise. The idea was to resolve the matter amicably with diplomacy between all the Great Powers involved; this was after all what the Concert had been designed for in the first place. Napoleon, and Palmerston, saw it as an opportunity to take the lead in the Eastern question and only as prelude to a likely escalation into war, not so much because either desired war but because it simply seemed probable. Russel and Clarendon were at this point of similar opinion due to the pressures of public opinion and distrust of Austria; a feature that would endure when Palmerston took office as prime minister in 1855.<sup>100</sup> Regardless of this, the negotiations of the Vienna Note proved fruitful, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of August Nicholas signed it. The Note gave Russia the victory she craved in that the Ottomans would concede to Russia's demands regarding the Orthodox Christians within her borders. The language was deliberately vague so as to leave a lot of room for interpretation, which would allow all parties involved to claim a diplomatic victory one way or the other.<sup>101</sup>

However, in a show of Great Power oversight, they had not given the Ottomans a seat at the table for the drafting of this note. To be fair, an invitation was extended, but as the Porte was undergoing

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100 Schroeder, *Great Britain and Austria*, 51-52.

101 Bartlett, *Peace and War*, 58.



a minor crisis at the time, it could not attend in time. The rest of the Powers proceeded with one seat empty, trusting the Ottomans to fall in line. However, considering that Russia took the resulting Note to mean that they could interfere in the Porte's internal affairs and were still, at this time, occupying two of its richer provinces, the Sultan demanded some minor alterations and that Russia retreat from his territories, coupled with a Concerted guarantee that the Tsar would keep his troops on his side of the border.

The interbellum between the Sultan's demands and the Tsar's rejection of said demands saw the breakdown of diplomacy. While the Note had been accepted by the four Great Powers involved, it quickly became clear via their foreign minister Nesselrode (1780-1862) that Russia interpreted the vagueness of the Note in the most belligerent way possible. This was difficult to reconcile with French and British expectations of it, not to mention with that of the Porte.

The Tsar refused the demands of the Porte, providing the stellar reasoning that he had already signed the note and was not going to change it. Canning is often blamed for the Porte not signing the Note, but research into the matter has indicated that the Ottomans, for some reason, felt disinclined to sign an agreement regarding their sovereignty that was forced upon them by the Great Powers (without being consulted on the matter) to please the Russian Tsar, the man who was currently occupying part of their lands in an attempt to blackmail them into ceding power to him. Pair this with the religious militant views that pervaded the Porte as demonstrated by Saab and Figes, and it is really no shock at all that the Ottomans were not in the mood to play ball. On the 20th of September the Porte refused the Note.

Correspondingly, on the 23rd Aberdeen and Russel ordered Canning to call up the fleet to Constantinople after catching wind of the news of both it and riots in the Ottoman capital. In this they disregarded both Aberdeen's earlier intent to only summon the fleet when the whole cabinet was in agreement and the international Straits Convention of 1841, something Aberdeen had been loath to do as such an action would likely trigger war; indeed, as mentioned above he had rebuked his overzealous colleagues on this issue on several occasions. This was not done, by his own admission, in response to the breakdown of diplomacy but to respond to the riots that had broken out in the city. The effort was to bolster the Sultan's forces if need be and secure his safety, as well as that of the British personnel and property present in the city.<sup>102</sup>

I find this justification somewhat dubious, at least so far as the surface level interpretation is involved. Aberdeen had up until that point been extremely cautious about sending the fleet to the Porte, even in the face of a Russian occupation of the principalities and the likelihood of the violence spreading south. The sending of the fleet was instead *coordinated* with the French mobilization for the same goal of supporting the Porte during the riots and protecting their personnel. Mind you, one such personnel, Stratford Canning, was not impressed with the riots and neglected to call on the British fleet for exactly that reason.<sup>103</sup>

Aberdeen and Russel called up the fleet based on messages passed on by the French who had received emergency calls from their people, requesting *small portion of the fleet*. This, rather than rely on their own ambassador. It has to be stressed in this regard that Aberdeen and Russel were deeply suspicious of Stratford at this point, presuming him to be overly supportive of the Ottomans and bent on war. While hindsight and research clearly demonstrate that this was a blatant

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102 Conacher, *The Aberdeen Coalition*, 189.

103 *Ibid.*, 188.

misrepresentation of Canning, it was the perception at the time. Regardless, Aberdeen and Russel decided to send the fleet forward under the pretext of a defensive manoeuvre, and one that Russel highlighted by stating that they (the Britain) 'must not retire till the Russians leave the principalities.' This seems to quite clearly connect the presence of the fleet to the ongoing diplomatic crisis and it also more or less renders the argument of Canning's warmongering moot; for they were undertaking exactly the sort of action they suspected their ambassador of wanting while said ambassador was at the time arguing *against* sending the fleet over.

This more duplicitous interpretation of the fleet conflicts with the notion of Aberdeen as the champion of 'peace above all else', but it is quite compatible with Aberdeen as the realpolitician that we've treated him as in this thesis. On the one hand we can attest that Aberdeen sought peace as to preserve the Balance of Power *but* would treat warfare as a legitimate option should British interests be threatened, and no diplomatic resolution could be achieved, even in the face of another Great Power.

For him to mobilize the fleet in the face of a direct threat to British objectives in Constantinople is not far-fetched, even if said threat was just a riot. However, Russel's hawkishness and the fact that this was a joint decision implies still more warlike considerations. I find it doubtful that Aberdeen would go this far just to aid in some attestedly unimpressive riots. While I cannot substantiate with a written account for this notion, it *is* well documented that Aberdeen was apprehensive for a break-up of the cabinet over this issue. I would theorize that Aberdeen perhaps considered *not* responding to the crisis in Constantinople both politically unfeasible at home, given public opinion was becoming more belligerent by the day and his cabinet unrulier, as well as leaving an opening for the Russians to 'intercede to resolve the crisis', which was even further from Aberdeen's objectives. Moving the fleet could function as an added element of pressure on Russia, a demonstration of intent, a political victory while simultaneously leaving Aberdeen the ability to pass it off as merely a defensive measure of no consequence or to still pull out.

The manoeuvre had mixed results. Russia did not respond with a declaration of war, but the Turkish declaration on the other hand has been directly linked to said movement of the fleet as it bolstered their confidence.<sup>104</sup> For all Aberdeen's attempts to prevent war, this move ran counter to it; though I must stress again my argument that may have felt that his hands were tied.

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104 Jelavich, *St. Petersburg and Moscow*, 120.

## 2.5: Sailing into War

That his hands were *not* tied was demonstrated in the meetings held at Olmütz at the start of October. The meetings were held between the Ambassadors of the Great Powers in another attempt to sue for peace. While the Ottoman Empire had declared war on the 4<sup>th</sup>, it had also given Russia fifteen days to evacuate from the principalities. Attempting to salvage the situation, the Tsar and Nesselrode travelled to Olmütz to meet with ambassadors from the powers involved and come to a solution. Here the Tsar stated outright that the 'aggressive' interpretation of the Vienna Note thus far presented to the other Powers was Nesselrode's alone, and that the Tsar sought a far more moderate settlement.<sup>105</sup> To Nicholas, the Vienna Note amounted to nothing more than a guarantee of the agreed upon rights for Orthodox subjects of the Ottomans, the status quo before this whole diplomatic debacle even began and that Russia made no claim to be allowed to infringe the sovereignty of the Sultan any further than the previous status quo would allow.<sup>106</sup> He was, to this end, willing to immediately retreat from the principalities (thus conforming to the Turkish ultimatum) when the Note was signed by all parties involved. At this point it would count as a diplomatic victory for the Tsar domestically as he had still achieved what he had set out to do.

While Napoleon had seemed willing to entertain the notion, Clarendon, backed by Russel and Palmerston, rejected the idea. They suspected that Russia's benevolence was a front and that the Tsar was setting a trap.<sup>107</sup> Retrospectively we can conclude that the Tsar had been genuine in his proposal, but the mistrust that had been created by the aggressive interpretation of the Vienna Note and the absolutely appalling conduct of Russian diplomacy in previous months had any proposal they could have made suspect by virtue of its origin. When paired with the rampant belligerence of British public opinion regarding Russia, it is little wonder that British statesmen saw no benefit in indulging the Tsar's insincerity; one of the many tragedies of this crisis.

The Ottoman declaration of war had also rendered the Vienna Note pointless to Clarendon, Russel and Palmerston, as the proposal no longer reflected the current situation anyway.<sup>108</sup> Schroeder, considering the exchanges and deliberations made at the Vienna Conference and after, argues that there were also practical reasons for the British statesmen to support the Ottomans:

1. Public opinion, something these men were far more sensitive to (and subject to) than Aberdeen was.
2. The maintenance of the Anglo-French alliance gathered for this crisis was another factor. Cordiality with the French was preferred over that with Russia, as one was a major military might on their doorstep and the other was not. Adding to this, where Aberdeen detested the French, they were ideological friends to the liberals on account of them standing for much the same antithesis with regards to landed interests and fundamental rights.
3. Of course, their own geopolitical interests in the region. Presuming upon the Tsar's falsehood, British interests in an intact Ottoman Empire were under definite threat. The above 'dismay at the aggressive interpretation of the note' was really just an excuse.<sup>109</sup>

There is equal evidence for all these reasons, and none are mutually exclusive: Clarendon and Russel (who led the charge) would, after all, not have felt compelled to defend their country's practical

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105 Ibid and Conacher, *The Aberdeen Coaliton*, 190.

106 H. Temperley, 'Stratford de Redcliffe and the origins of the Crimean War' in *E.H.R.* (1933), 265-298, 284-287.

107 Schroeder, *Britain and Austria*, 61.

108 Conacher, *The Aberdeen Coaliton*, 192-193.

109 Schroeder, *Britain and Austria*, 65.

interests in such a confrontational way if they had any faith in the goodwill of the Tsar. Both views follow naturally from the other.

Palmerston saw one positive note in this failure for peace though: it made the movement of the fleet so early much easier to sell, now that it could be legitimately claimed to function as military aid to the Ottomans in the event of warfare. Aberdeen responded with incredulity and held out hope that the threat of war with France and Britain, more certain than ever now, would compel the Tsar to back down entirely.<sup>110</sup> In his conversations with the Russian ambassador he noted that Brunnow (1797-1875), the Russian ambassador to London, was quite panicked at the idea, and indeed we can retrospectively assert that Russia well and truly did not want this.

Neither, in fact, did the Ottomans. As Figes argues, the Ottoman declaration of war had a twofold goal, the first of which was to avert domestic crisis as a result of religious fanaticism.<sup>111</sup> While I stand by my earlier critique that Figes overstates religiosity in the Crisis, if only because it is too narrow a perspective to account for the Crisis in full, in the conflict itself it demonstrates its use. The Ottoman Empire had been balancing on a tightrope for months; the riots that had prompted the Western Powers to send their fleet to Constantinople were an example thereof. Powerful factions, as Saab argued before Figes, were calling for a Holy War on Russia to settle the score. Ignoring such calls came at an increasing political cost to the moderates, dangerously so. Declaring war was in a strange way the safer option at this point as it diverted that tension outward.

The second objective was to bring the matter to a head, to force the issue. The Turks, much more so than the Russians, appreciated the power of British public opinion and rightly assumed it to be on their side. With the British backing them as well as the French, the hope was that Russia might be pressured into abandoning her pursuits altogether. Even as the troops mobilized the hope for a diplomatic outcome was not completely out of reach. This, as we've addressed before, was the same for the Tsar in some ways. While he banked his military strategy on revolutionary sentiment of the Christian populace of the Balkan and within the Ottoman Empire, he initially (persuaded by his generals, it must be said) waged a defensive war in hopes of some diplomatic breakthrough still.

A similar policy was pursued by Aberdeen. With the Ottoman declaration of war, the Dardanelles were now open; but to immediately push into the Black Sea would mean outright war with Russia, something that is important point out: Britain and France were at this point in time not involved in the war effort, and Aberdeen still hoped they might avert that. While any war between the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire would shake the Balance of Power in Europe, the less parties involved, the smaller the damage was certain to be. This would be a difficult task as he suspected that Russel and Palmerston would push for Britain to at the very least function in the service of the Ottoman empire in a supporting capacity, even if they did not outright join the fighting. Aberdeen remarks to Graham that he expected to stand alone in the cabinet in his desire for restraint but found Gladstone similarly inclined toward the same end.<sup>112</sup>

This gave him the will to push for a position of neutrality and mediation in the conflict, expecting the French not to escalate things without the explicit backing of the British if they did. Aberdeen pushed this view through in the face of Russel's and Palmerston's suggestions of the expected support to the Ottomans (going so far as to call for the British fleet to maintain the neutrality of the Black Sea by attacking any and all Russian Warships therein). Aberdeen consented partially by allowing the fleet into the Black Sea 'strictly in defence of some point of attack on

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110 Conacher, *The Aberdeen Coaliton*, 193.

111 Figes, *Crimea*, 130.

112 Conacher, *The Aberdeen Coaliton*, 194.

Turkish territory' if Canning called on it.<sup>113</sup> He hoped that a defensive policy would mitigate the risks of escalation. This, again, is perfectly in line with his frame of reference: it would create time for the diplomatic climate to become less belligerent, would generate the absolute minimum amount of strain on British resources while simultaneously defending British honour, and in the event of escalation British fleets would already be in position. The war between the Ottomans and the Russians itself was not directly a threat to British interests, but the prospect of Russia dismantling the Empire and threatening the Turkish lands would be, i.e. and 'attack on Turkish territory' was. Hence the British would only intercede when the conflict got to that stage and no sooner. This pushed the date in which Britain would join the war as far into the future as possible, buying as much time as possible for the situation to cool.

Again, Conacher finds this response by Aberdeen odd, certainly when you consider that he all but completely forgoes any attempt to address the possibility of peace via the Olmütz proposals. This is again an example of the antiquated view of Aberdeen as the man of 'peace at all costs', which we argue he was not. Furthermore, it has been noted that both his cabinet and British public opinion would not allow for withdrawal at this point, even if Aberdeen still considered the Tsar to be acting in good faith. This may seem a dubious proposition, that Aberdeen still thought the Tsar to be ultimately acting in good faith. However, when pressed a few months into the future he would reiterate that all suffered under this plight, including Russia:

'I cannot consider war as inevitable, believing, as I do, that all the Powers concerned in this dispute, including the Emperor of Russia himself, whose conduct for many years has been a proof of the fact, know and fully estimate the serious consequence war must be to Europe in general; and looking, also, to the exertions he has made in former years to preserve peace, it makes me think it not at all impossible that even he, on whom depends the decision in a great measure of this question, may entertain such views as may end in peace.'<sup>114</sup>

Nevertheless, with the Ottoman and Russian empires at war the Olmütz proposals had lost most of their validity anyway. If anything, Aberdeen was a pragmatist, and practically, to secure British interests a degree of support had to be given to the Ottomans as withdrawing would likely only embolden Russia at this point.

While it would be easy to argue that, considering in hindsight that the Tsar was sincere in the limited scope of his objectives, that Britain could safely have pulled out altogether and not have bothered at all, this would have had adverse consequences. While it would certainly have pulled the French out with them and perhaps forced the Ottomans into conceding the Olmütz proposals, it would have backfired domestically. It would have fractured the cabinet to the breaking point and, with popular approval leaning decidedly toward a militant approach, Palmerston (who placed great faith in British military might, an overstated faith in some cases) would have likely guided them toward war anyway. I bring this up not in an effort to indulge in 'what-if-history', but to illustrate that even under the most optimistic interpretation of the Tsar's goodwill, doing anything less than what Aberdeen admitted to would be nothing short of ensuring an equal if not worse outcome. This was undoubtedly something that Aberdeen was aware of.

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113 Conacher, *The Aberdeen Coalition*, 195.

114 Hansard: HL Deb 14 February 1854, vol 130, cols 646.

In terms of diplomatic development, after much disagreement the British government dispatched to Vienna on the 8<sup>th</sup> of October the conclusion that the Tsar could not be taken at just his word and urged Franz Joseph to make Russia pull back.

Aberdeen was not happy with the belligerent tone of the communique, but there is no indication that he disagreed with the content. Even when now, some hope for diplomacy held out. Conacher notes cynically that this was too little too late, as their own actions had already sent them all drifting towards 'inevitable war' (referring specifically to the British cabinet).<sup>115</sup> While I have generously appreciated his contributions, I think this notion is perhaps an oversimplification. Internal correspondence between the Tsar and his most trusted general Paskevich clearly reveal that Russia decided to pursue a defensive strategy themselves, ergo do their utmost *not* to cross the British, in hopes that a diplomatic solution might yet develop.<sup>116</sup>

The inevitability of war seems overstated, even if it did remain likely. Furthering this, he overstates the degree to which Britain actually contributed towards the crisis escalating into war. While the movement of the fleet cannot be taken lightly as it did place the Great Powers directly into each-other crosshairs, it has to be remembered that the only reason Britain was not willing to entertain Russia's attempts at a diplomatic solution was because they could only be accepted if London took a chance on the goodwill of the Tsar, a goodwill that he had so far demonstrated by being bullying in his diplomacy and outright belligerent in his actions. This paired with the Tsar's visit in 1844 wherein he sought British assurances for concerted action in the event of the Ottoman Empire's fall generated an easy and logical conclusion: the Tsar wanted to bring about the end of the strategically important Ottoman Empire, hence the botched diplomacy, hence the aggression.

However, suspicious as the British were and belligerent as the Russians were, all sides seemed to be in agreement that peace was preferable, hence a solution was still sought. While war had been declared on the 4<sup>th</sup>, hostilities did not emerge presently (as mentioned above, the declaration was more of a bargaining chip than an attempt to kickstart an immediate conflict on the part of the Ottomans), leaving Canning to further negotiate with the Sultan and Aberdeen to support said negotiations. Canning attempted another proposal, which would concede both Russia's terms as well as those of the Porte, to which Aberdeen added for the Porte's benefit that Britain would not be drawn into a war 'they have already condemned' and represented a policy that was 'inconsistent with the peace of Europe.'<sup>117</sup> This was an obvious effort to pressure the Ottomans into conceding or at the very least postpone hostilities further, for without a certainty of British support one way or the other they stood no chance. Aberdeen noted that this concession was needed so as to not be dragged into war by the 'barbarians.' Canning was very helpful in maintaining this illusion as he neglected to call up the fleet even though he very well could at this point. This conduct was against the wishes of Palmerston, Russell and Clarendon, who had already committed to the need to support the Ottomans. Where Aberdeen wanted to scare off the Ottomans with the spectre of withholding aid, they wanted to do the same to Russia by ensuring said aid; essentially the same strategy but with a different target. Both sides of the argument brawled over the wording and policy of the cabinet for at least another week before it was finally agreed upon and sent to Constantinople on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, the same date that the allied fleet entered the Dardanelles.

The degree to which the British should get involved in the ongoing war effort remained a strong point of contention, particularly between Aberdeen and Palmerston. While it has been shown that

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115 Conacher, *The Aberdeen Coalition* 201.

116 Figes, *Crimea*, 131.

117 Conacher, *The Aberdeen Coalition* 202.

Aberdeen was willing to pursue military action for Britain's interests, he consistently clung to the notion that, contrary to his colleagues, the eleventh hour had yet to arrive. Until proven otherwise, he wrote in response to Palmerston's pushing for more direct action, 'Peace is still our objective.' He followed this by assessing that if the Turks sought to ignore the efforts for peace Britain made on their behalf, he was personally not inclined to allow Britain's freedom of (political) movement to be high-jacked by an Empire he, as we've mentioned previously, found sourly lacking. Due to this, he sought to preserve it through peace rather than war, as it was still the optimal eventuality. Amusingly, Aberdeen lists amongst the many failures of the Ottoman Empire that it had lost control of its population (as exemplified by the riots) and that it was 'obliged to act under the pressure of popular dictation', quite obviously a reference to Palmerston's (over)reliance on the sentiments of public opinion.<sup>118</sup>

In the subsequent weeks, skirmishes between the Ottomans and Russians continued and several attempts to sue for peace were made by Stratford, Aberdeen and even the Tsar. All fell flat because the diplomatic status quo that had prohibited peace had remained unchanged. Palmerston's attempts to, again, move the peace conference to London in an explicit bid for leadership in the Concert was firmly opposed by Aberdeen. This was again for obvious reasons when one considers our framework: moving the bulk of the international community to London, while certainly a prestigious thing, would involve Britain far too deeply in the conflict and necessarily limit her options. Furthermore, the implicit geopolitical shift would not just affect Russia, but all three of the continental conservative Powers and the very nature of the Concert system, all of which were, in Aberdeen's perception, better left as they were. Last but not least, a leading, active role in the international community as envisaged by Palmerston and the export of the liberal worldview under it would, I am sure, constitute a great strain on British resources. From every conceivable angle, the idea clashes with Aberdeen's convictions.

But for all his dismissiveness of a government held hostage by popular sentiment, Aberdeen would soon feel the brunt of it. While hostilities between St. Petersburg and the Porte continued apace, a decisive turning point was the 30<sup>th</sup> of November, a day that would be infamously remembered as 'the massacre at Sinope.'

The Turkish offensive was done primarily by land, with their weak fleet serving as a supplier rather than an active participant in the conflict. Nonetheless, it was a fair military target and as it was anchored at Sinope, well within the range of the Russian fleet to take care of it, so it was. The Russian fleet decimated the fleet utterly, killing an easy third of the Porte's naval personnel, as well as hundreds of civilians of Sinope. While by no means a surprising turn of events to any statesman, this was war after all, the outrage it sparked was of immense importance. In the Ottoman Empire it spurred more protests, as well as great resistance to any attempts at peace made by the Sultan's government, attempts that were redoubled as the escalation continued.<sup>119</sup>

As Aberdeen had promised to act if key Turkish positions in the Black Sea or on their mainland were threatened, and Sinope was both, the fleet was now finally allowed to start trickling into the Black Sea as a demonstration that they meant business. It should again be stressed that this, like so many other moves, was both a progression toward war as well as an attempt to scare all parties involved (particularly Russia) into accepting that this was real, this would mean war, and that if things kept

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118 *Aberdeen Correspondence 1852-1855*, pp. 334-337, November 6<sup>th</sup> 1853.

119 Figes, *Crimea*, 143-144.

going on like this then they would all be dragged in. As far as the Crisis went, this was par the course at this point. However, British public opinion went wild on account of it. Popular demand for war against Russia, the result of months of priming and decades of anti-Russian sentiment, were hard to ignore. Curiously, Palmerston had resigned from the cabinet on the 14<sup>th</sup> and was loudly calling for British interference. It was the pretext he had been aching for. Figs argues that Palmerston resigned over differences of opinion regarding the Eastern Question, but Conacher manages to compellingly refute this based on an examination of the timeline involved.<sup>120, 121</sup> The two merely coincided conveniently and as we saw above, the coalition required no additional motivation to respond to the Eastern Question when it had to, albeit in a tamer manner than was called for by the hawks in the cabinet and public opinion.

This was, incidentally, the ultimate death of faith in the Tsar's goodwill amongst most politicians. Kingsley Martin suggests that while significant portions of the British public were contemptuous of Russia and supported British involvement in protecting the Turks from the start of the crisis, they were less inclined towards a full-blown war.<sup>122</sup> This changed with Sinope. Whereas previously moderation was king to some degree, now belligerence gained momentum. Where before there was division within the public sphere and media, paper publications across the board now rallied behind the cause of war.

This was reflected in the political sphere. Even Aberdeen championed intervention. While he was ill at ease with the idea, Aberdeen agreed with Russel that 'open war' was preferred to a hidden one, and that if the Russians crossed the Danube, Britain would open offensives all over the Black Sea.<sup>123</sup> He remained adamant in his hope for peace, and was still hesitant to be overly proactive, something that frustrated Russel to no end, but was accepted. Russel did argue that it was politically inexpedient to ignore the public outcry (indicating that anything short of decisive action was unacceptable). Aberdeen recognized this but mentioned that he still held out that the Sultan's efforts for peace that had been galvanized by the battle of Sinope would bear fruit. In the meantime, Britain and France steadily expanded their agreements and scope of operations regarding their presence in the Black Sea (particularly the policy of neutralizing it as a factor in the war). While only a while back Aberdeen had shunned such initiatives because they might invoke war, at this point he had concluded that the threat was no greater than before.<sup>124</sup> Steadily though, the line in the sand that separated peace from war was brought ever closer to the feet of Britain. While he hoped for peace, the drift was obvious.

This policy of strengthening the allied position in the Black Sea (up to and including formal warnings to the Russian navy of their intent) was at odds with the negotiations for peace made between the Porte and St. Petersburg, mediated by Canning and the foreign minister of Austria, Buol. While the resulting 'Stratford Note' came closer to peace than any before and there was a clear desire amongst all parties to prevent a general European conflict, the more assertive policy of the Anglo-French alliance raised Russia's hackles, rendering them unresponsive to further attempts. This was not so much a deliberate attempt by either the British or the French, as both asserted that they were merely attempting to prevent another Sinope and had no intention for aggression, but the result of simple time lag between news and responses from the Western capitals and negotiations in Vienna

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120 For Figs' perspective, see Figs, *Crimea*, 146.

121 For Conacher's rebuttal, see Conacher, *The Aberdeen Coalition*, 215-232.

122 Martins, *The Triumph of Lord Palmerston*, 170.

123 *Aberdeen Correspondence 1852-1855*, pp. 402-403, 13<sup>th</sup> of December 1853.

124 *Aberdeen Correspondence 1852-1855*, pp. 425-426,, 22<sup>nd</sup> of December 1853.



and even further east in the imperial courts.<sup>125</sup> Orders given often only arrived when the diplomatic reality that had spawned them had already changed, sometimes drastically so.

Russia's grief over the British and French actions were so great that their ambassadors in Paris and London requested their passports back, a move mirrored by the allies when they recalled their own ambassadors. There is much dispute regarding where Britain stood when it came to the war at this point. While it was obvious that many statesmen were resigned to the likelihood, the degree to which it was actually desired depends on how much stock one puts in the influence of Palmerston and public opinion. Figes, per example, goes as far as to say that the British were actively pushing for war at this point under the direction of Palmerston.<sup>126</sup> Conacher states that the French public opinion was much colder towards war and it is arguable that this informed Napoleon's attempts at peace, quite a contrast to the British.<sup>127</sup> While it would be folly to underestimate the power of either Palmerston or public opinion, we must take it with a grain of salt: as has hopefully been demonstrated throughout this paper, the situation was liable to escalate and war was always an option of last resort, as Butcher has already argued before me, and Aberdeen was quite capable of taking steps towards war independently of both Palmerston and public opinion.

However, one could legitimately question whether or not Aberdeen's Russophilia was perhaps evident in his reluctance. While it is demonstrable that he was much more willing to engage than the historiography thus far has implied, his reluctance in engaging Russia compared to engaging France is noteworthy at least. I would respond to this question by arguing that it was not so much a conflict with a Great Power that frightened Aberdeen, but the prospect of that conflict upsetting the Balance of Power to the detriment of Britain. A war with Russia would fracture the conservative balance, another 'Napoleonic war' with France would enforce its validity in that the current system, which benefited Britain, was already fine tuned to contain France and relied upon a conservative bedrock, i.e. the Holy Alliance.

Regardless of Aberdeen's thoughts on the matter, war steadily drifted closer and the mood in London turned towards preparation rather than avoidance. On the Russian end, the Tsar has been argued to have taken leave of his senses when he embarked in a deliberate campaign to antagonize any peace offering made. Figes more compellingly argues, based on Nicholas his own writings, that the monarch firmly believed that Russia stood a fair chance against even the combined might of the Ottomans, French, British and even Austrians. In this he often invoked the war of 1812.<sup>128</sup> As has been noted by both Figes and Kennedy in their assessment of Russian military power, this dream did not hold up to the reality of Russian might, or relative lack thereof.<sup>129, 130</sup> But as Figes' narrative argues, the Tsar was acting more on emotion and faith with the bare modicum of rational arguments to back them up. This, paired with British resignation to war, put the writing on the wall. With both sides more or less resigned and not responding to each other's pleas, Britain and France declared war on Russia at the end of March.

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125 Conacher, *The Aberdeen Coalition*, 246-247.

126 Figes, *Crimea*, 155.

127 Conacher, *The Aberdeen Coalition*, 248.

128 Figes, *Crimea*, 156-157.

129 Figes, *Crimea*, 116-119.

130 Kennedy, *Rise and Fall*, 170-174.

## 2.6: Palmerston and the War.

All that remains is a brief synopsis of the war effort. As foreign policy was by necessity completely high-jacked by the war effort, there is little point in trying to apply Aberdeen's framework to his actions for the subsequent year. I stick to my earlier resolution of not writing this paper in terms dictated by Whig history and have thus avoided writing about Palmerston as much as I could. Now we must delve a little deeper in how Palmerston's foreign policy affected the war, for even with the cannons firing there are ways in which one can seek for peace. This does serve to contrast with Aberdeen, in that it will once again highlight the characteristics of Aberdeen's philosophy regarding foreign affairs.

As to the war itself, put bluntly, it was a mess. This is not to say that the allies were losing, for this is patently untrue: the deck was stacked in their favour quite handsomely. As we noted above, the Russian army was patently underdeveloped: it was poorly supplied, had an antiquated structure and ethos, was poorly led and was difficult to mobilize due to lack of railroads south of Moscow. Reinforcements could quite literally take weeks if not months to arrive.

However, Britain was no star player either. Due to the absence of conscription the British military was dwarfed by all other parties involved and it was dated in every sense of the word: like the Russians, the ethos still reflected the Napoleonic Wars. The composition of the army was equally stagnant and filled with elderly soldiers (quite useful for experience of course, but one might question the validity of that experience given this context and at the end of the day war is about combat, an arena in which the young are per definition better equipped to perform) and its logistics were appalling especially on the subject of medical treatment and supplies.<sup>131</sup> Parliament would throughout the war question how an advanced nation like Britain could perform so poorly in these regards, though most of these bugs would be fixed under the Aberdeen administration still.

Until such time, the only thing the British military brought to the table was their massive fleet, which could effectively blockade harbours and disrupt supply chains. That, and it could comfort itself with the knowledge that all parties were suffering from performance issues one way or the other. The French, by contrast, were quite effective: the African forays that Aberdeen had so detested had done wonders for keeping the French military active and experienced, while it also produced notable expertise in warfare abroad; hence their supply lines, equipment and strategies were far more effective than that of any other power.<sup>132</sup> However, they suffered the financial strain of war more acutely than the British, and the loss of human lives was not something to forget even if you were winning.<sup>133</sup>

But in 1855, a year into the war, victory was but a glimmer on the horizon and made for cold comfort. Meanwhile, the Aberdeen coalition was failing to haul in *any* victory of note. Like Sinope functioned as a focus point for the escalation of the conflict that the public could latch their outrage on to, so too would a strong symbolic victory be needed to latch onto positively, per example the defeat of the Russian stronghold Sebastopol. The Aberdeen coalition was failing to provide just that, as well as any information on how the war was proceeding really. The pressure for an update was mounting, which ultimately accumulated in the *Times* doing their own bit of investigation which

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131 Kennedy, *Rise and fall*, 174.

132 *Ibid.*, 176.

133 *Ibid.*, 175.

revealed the horror under that the soldiers suffered. This triggered Commons to demand clarification, and Aberdeen took this entire scandal as a vote of no confidence and promptly resigned, as he had by all accounts intended to do years ago. After both Russel and Derby failed to create another coalition, the job fell to Palmerston.

This thesis has established from the start that Palmerston and Aberdeen were never polar opposites, but merely two points in a spectrum. This generally holds true. Palmerston was never one to embrace splendid isolation as such, indeed he even made a point early on in his career, saying that it had “never been the character of the English nation, or of the British Parliament, to feel an indifference with respect to the affairs of Europe.”<sup>134</sup> The degree to which and the nature of British involvement in Europe is where they differed: Palmerston staunchly refused close cooperation on the grounds that an empire with such far-flung and diverse interests as the British simply could not be tied down to anything as it rendered the Empire uncompromising, not a good position. Underpinning this was the ideological consideration that Britain ought to intervene in favour of Liberal causes in Europe and that they should only intervene incidentally, swiftly, when it was needed. Here Palmerston was willing to compromise on British detachment to a degree via limited treaties such as the Quadruple Alliance mentioned earlier.

Radical intervention on behalf of liberalism was part of the package for Palmerston, as he himself said in 1853 during the crisis, they would only go to war to “in defence of the liberty and independence of nations, and for the maintenance of that balance of power, which, however the honorable Gentleman may treat it with contempt and sneer at, because he does not understand it—every body else considers to be a point deserving of assertion, and essential to the liberty and well-being of mankind.”<sup>135</sup>

This of course ties in to the fact that Palmerston overestimated the power of the British military’s ability to actually uphold these vaunted ideals; the Crimean War would demonstrate the folly of that thinking.<sup>136</sup>

In the historiography, this difference of opinion is often cited as one of the main reasons why the foreign policy of Britain during the Crimean Crisis was so ineffective: the compromises needed to reconcile Palmerston’s and Aberdeen’s views, close enough to work together but too distant to do so amicably, caused the resulting policy to be a blur. Conacher reiterates this talking point. I reject this, as ultimately the British foreign policy was reasonably consistent with Aberdeen’s ideas of it. That there was debate in the cabinet about it does not equal a translation into policy; this line of thinking implies that every assertive step (a cynical mind might add ‘towards war’) was due to Palmerston and every attempt to make peace was Aberdeen’s influence. We have seen that both made decisions that served both those ends, and that to distinguish between what steps promoted war and which did not is nigh impossible as they often did both or neither.

Once in power though, Palmerston had to pursue a policy that would get the job done *and* mesh with public sentiment. He was always far more concerned with that than Aberdeen; not without cause as it was a major factor of his power. This pressure eventually manifested as a ‘take no prisoners’ policy in that it the goal of the war was no longer just to defeat Russia, but to be seen doing it, to be acknowledged for doing it, and to demonstrate British ability to humiliate Russia while

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134 Hansard: HC Deb 19 February 1836, vol 31, cols 614-69.

135 Hansard: HC Deb 16 August 1853, vol 129, cols 1760-811.

136 Bartlett, *Peace, war*, 65.

doing it.<sup>137</sup> This manifested during the peace talks (ever ongoing throughout the war) in the ‘four points plan’:

1. Russia would forgo any claims to the Danubian principalities in every sense.
2. The Danube would be opened to free trade.
3. The neutralisation of the Black Sea was to be reaffirmed stronger than ever, barring all warships from it during anytime.
4. Russia would not longer intercede on behalf of Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire in any way.

As we’ve discussed the Tsar’s worldview above, it should be obvious that resigning the right to protect Christians in the Balkans would be an enormous ideological blow to the Tsar’s legitimacy. From a more diplomatic perspective, limiting the freedom of movement and influence of a Great Power in what was nominally their own sphere of influence was not a proposal that was ever going to go down well.<sup>138</sup>

This uncompromising attitude also extended to Austria. As we’ve discussed, Austria was pressured by both sides to throw her weight in the scales on their behalf, a suicidal notion either way you slice it. I also mentioned that this eventually was major factor in cessation of the Concert’s functioning. Austria was the conservative linchpin of the Concert. While Britain gained from the Concert because it maintained a status quo where they were already the most powerful, Austria gained from her security from it because she was the likeliest country to lose out in any disruption of said the balance.

While Palmerston asserted his desire to uphold the balance of power, he overbalanced against Russia by making the struggle in ideological one and entwining it with British honour, honour in the conventional sense, contrary to Aberdeen’s ‘pragmatic’ notion of honour. The resulting humiliating peace shattered relationships amongst the powers. Britain was once again disillusioned with the continent and turned inwards. Russia turned away from the other powers and became openly revisionist of the Paris Treaty that ended the war in 1856. Austria had no allies left, as they had been pressured into offending the British by being unable to aid them in the war as well as having offended the Russians by no assisting their long-time ally. France despised Austria for obvious reasons and had a vested interest in gaining a foothold in the Italian peninsula, Austria’s sphere of influence, and was still a revisionist power itself. Prussia, while sympathetic to the Austrian plight, took her weakened position in stride to increase its relative influence in the German Confederation at Austria’s expense.

Thus the Crimean Crisis and subsequent War shattered relations amongst the Great Powers for decades and caused the Concert of Europe to collapse, a situation that would not be fixed until the German unification ended both Russia’s revisionism as well as crushing France’s pretensions to continental hegemony.

Turning back to Aberdeen, it seems that for the Crimean Crisis, Butcher’s framework is just as applicable as it was in the 1840s, being capable of both explaining established ideas about the man and period as well as filling bumps in the road that the conventional paradigm on Aberdeen cannot easily overcome.

Butcher’s framework can. The period of the Crimean Crisis essentially comes down to ‘to fleet, or not to fleet’, that is when and how does Britain intercede in the crisis in the East and in what way. In

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137 Schroeder, *Crimean War*, 409-411.

138 J. Lowe, *Britain and foreign affairs 1815-1885: Europe and overseas* (1998), 59.

this we see that Aberdeen is mostly a victim of the international stage, in that his ability to affect matters is always after the fact because the theatre is thousands of miles away. That said, there is still a distinguishable pattern of thinking on how Aberdeen approached this: don't rock the boat. Aberdeen weighed his options in the Russo-Turkic conflict, and deemed overtly supporting either an unacceptable risk. Supporting the Ottomans would give the Turks incentive to escalate the situation and drag Britain into war with one of the key players of the Holy Alliance and the conservative world order that Aberdeen fought for decades to maintain. However, backing the Russians or allowing them to do as they pleased, would be an equally bad outcome because any partition of the Ottoman Empire would destabilize the balance and would bring Russia into the Mediterranean, qualifying as a legitimate geopolitical threat in its own right.

As a result, Aberdeen abstained from supporting, not, as many have argued, out of any overt love of peace or Russophilia or Turkophobia, but for the plain simple reason that supporting either was not in Britain's interests. Instead, Aberdeen fought to find a diplomatic solution and only moved militarily when every other alternative was worse, such as sending the fleet is when, so this thesis holds, the threat of Russian interference in the Ottoman Empire on the back of domestic unrest was too high to chance.

Butcher's framework fits onto this conundrum like a glove, and can give better rationalization for Aberdeen's considerations than the conventional paradigm does.

It must be stressed, again, that Butcher's framework perhaps *over*-rationalizes Aberdeen to the point of all but neglecting his emotional and fallible aspects, but it is fair to say that both those qualities do not diminish the plausibility of a more clinical interpretation of Aberdeen's policy regarding the Crimean Crisis.

## Conclusion

We began this paper with an observation: conservative foreign policy during the Crimean Crisis, particularly that of Lord Aberdeen, has been misunderstood and misrepresented in historiography. Throughout the long historiography of the Crimean War, Aberdeen is depicted as either incompetently pacifist or nefariously Russophilic; often both. This reduces the man to a simplicity he is undeserving of, and seeing as failing to understand Aberdeen, one of the major players in the crisis, directly impacts one's understanding of how the Crimean War came about, a closer examination was warranted.

In an effort to do so, we took the study of S. Butcher as a jumping off point to re-examine Aberdeen, as the study makes a point of going against the grain of presenting Aberdeen as an ineffectual 'peace-above-all-else' and instead posits a vision of Aberdeen being more about 'peace-above-all-else; unless war is required.' Butcher held that given Aberdeen's political ideology, based on Pitt, Castlereagh and Peel, it was far more appropriate to consider Aberdeen's decisions during his term as foreign secretary in the 1840s in a much colder light than was usually considered in the historiography, and to dismiss 'Palmerstonian' terms of debate in favour of dealing with Aberdeen on his own terms.

In the first chapter, this framework was examined and embedded in primary and secondary literature. We found that Butcher's framework, which presupposed that Aberdeen was less a bumbling idealist and more of a cynic when it came to foreign policy, was perfectly applicable to his policy in the 1840s. It made narrative sense and was logically compatible with primary source material. The only critique this paper offers against it is that this framework goes out of its way to dehumanize Aberdeen; something that is certainly not backed up by the source material. Nevertheless, this does not invalidate the framework; it merely suggests that it might be incomplete.

This framework was then applied to the Crimean Crisis, specifically Aberdeen's policy in the face of it. Through the works of primarily Figs and Conacher and the primary source material it was easy to reconstruct a sequence of events for the crisis.

From that, to his contributions in the House and again to the mentality we can glean from his letters and the recollections of others, the framework continues to fit. Butcher's narrative would expect Aberdeen to look at what British interests were, commit the minimum amount of resources to achieving them, and be willing to throw Britain's weight around if it was absolutely necessary. This Aberdeen did: he refused to commit to either side in the squabble regarding the Holy Places in an effort to keep things from escalating, which bought time for the international community to look for a diplomatic solution, demonstrated in his personal correspondence. Furthering this, when the prospect of either side escalating the conflict loomed, Aberdeen was quick to either threaten to withdraw support altogether or to throw Britain's weight in the scale on the *other* side in an attempt to reset the game-state to a stalemate, again allowing for more time for diplomacy to prevail.

That this policy failed had more to do with the fact that Tsar Nicholas was not of the soundest mind when it came to estimating Russian power and was thus far more eager to commit to war than he had any right to be, as well as the fact that domestically, there was much aversion for the gendarme of Europe; indicated by the works of Kennedy and Figs. This made Aberdeen's manoeuvrability poor, and his position as prime-minister did not help him in the same way that it would hamper Palmerston in the last year of the war.

This did not stop Palmerston from committing himself to the exact sort of policy that Aberdeen had been avoiding, which led to Russia's defeat at the cost of prolonging the war needlessly, alienating Austria and humiliating Russia to such an extent that she henceforth became a revisionist power like France was. Ultimately, the conclusions here have an admittedly minimal change on the overall narrative of the Crimean Crisis as the key events happened in a theatre where all of British politics was a distant background noise. However, there is clear indication that Aberdeen's handling of the crisis has been cast in an overly harsh light. This holds true for liberal conservative foreign policy during the 1840s as Butcher argued, and it holds true for the Crimean Crisis just as well.

As the debate regarding that great wars of the past is ever ongoing and fires up every now and then when it becomes relevant, it remains important to understand the characters of these stories to be understood with the proper nuance. In this regard, Aberdeen was in need of rehabilitation, as the conventional historiography seems more keen to put him in line with Chamberlain whereas the man was much more of a Churchill. This paper should demonstrate that Aberdeen was far more complex, and his plausible rehabilitation should be a strong signal that there is value in revisionism of the conventional narrative regarding historical debate, even if it is only something as minimal as the inner workings of a single politician.

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