

The Great Powers and the End of the Ottoman Empire

Edited by

MARIAN KENT

Deakin University



FRANK CASS

LONDON

Russia and the End of the Ottoman Empire

Alan Bodger, University College of Swansea

For Russia the Congress of Berlin played the Eastern Question into a diplomatic vacuum that lasted until 1871. During that time Russia's military, economic and political difficulties compelled her to pursue a conservative policy towards the Ottoman Empire. From the renewal of the Three Emperors' League in 1881, through the alignment with France in the 1890s, down to the Anglo-Russian *rapprochement* of 1907, Russia worked in harmony with the Concert Powers—especially Austria—to preserve the *status quo* in the Ottoman Empire. The active focus of her foreign policy switched from the Balkans and the Near East to Persia and the Far East, with the war against Japan and the subsequent revolution absorbing most of her attention between 1904 and 1906.¹

For all the traditional Russian belief in the Eastern Question had been forgotten in Europe, control over the Straits, national sentiment for the Balkan Christian peoples, and occasional political influence throughout the region remained the ultimate goals of Russian policy. But there was long-term, steady, conservative, unprejudiced, and selfless work going on in the Russian Empire. Gradually, Russia could pursue these goals without need for the war effort, by diplomatic combination with the Powers, or by alliance with the Powers itself. The crisis of 1871 is best explained once again, and with exaggerated clarity, that the crisis involved more essentially international, of general European concern and sympathy of relations sought by Russian pressure against the Porte. Russian diplomatic alignments, first with the Central Powers, then with France, brought more security but no enlargement or lasting support for Russia's essential aim in a region where all the Powers divided against Russia.² Russia's acknowledgment of Russia's right to enter Constantinople and the Straits should Turkey collapse ended with the signing of the Constantinople Treaty in 1878. From then on Germany was concerned to defend Russian positions in the Near East.³ From 1878, Russia's main ally, France, sought to strengthen Russia's position in Germany's eastern frontier, rather than to encourage her position in the Near East.⁴ By the end of the century Britain, Russia's traditional opponent in the Eastern Question, may no longer have considered the Ottoman Empire as a really self-sufficient and stable government or that the Royal Navy could govern a Russian Empire in the Aegean, but she sought an abiding of Anglo-Russian hostility as Russian representatives gained acceptance in Persia and China.⁵ The third strategy, a Russo-Turkish rapprochement, a treaty signed against England in 1871 and 1875, or a Russo-British in 1875, was long after by the latter's commitment of Russian territory and the central desire to play off France against Russia, but consistently with an account of