

## MSt Research Proposal (Global History)

### The Roots of Geopolitics: The 'Eastern Question' in the British Political Imagination, 1872-1878

My research will examine geopolitical language in the British debate surrounding the “Eastern Question” in the period leading up to the Congress of Berlin in 1878. I will tackle two questions. First, how did the use of geopolitical concepts in Eastern Question discourse shape Britain’s foreign policy interest in Ottoman territory? Second, how did British perceptions of Ottoman decline in the 1870s lay the intellectual foundation for the development of classical geopolitics a generation later?

Searching for what the historian John Lewis Gaddis called “geopolitical codes” and drawing insights from the field of critical geopolitics, I will examine the private and public language used by national leaders, political commentators, and newspaper essayists to justify Britain’s interest in Ottoman territory from 1872 to 1878. Secondary questions include: How did advocates of British support for bolstering the beleaguered Ottoman Empire frame their arguments in terms of a continental struggle for valuable terrain, command of which would give the victor outsized influence in the world? Was public discourse (pamphlets, newspapers, politicians’ speeches) reflected in private deliberations (Cabinet meetings and diplomatic messages)? Did leaders give greater weight to *realpolitik* geopolitical considerations behind closed doors than they did in public? How did spatial concepts of power and domination give pro-Ottoman British leaders rhetorical ammunition to justify supporting the Ottomans against the Russians, particularly in the face of indignation over Ottoman atrocities? The power of *realpolitik* discourse to act as a rhetorical foil against liberal humanitarianism in the 1870s carries echoes in today’s world.

### **Background**

Geopolitical thought bloomed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, coinciding with Britain’s expansion of empire and increasing Great Power competition in Europe. Historians generally credit the development of formal geopolitics to four thinkers writing between 1890 and 1920 (Alfred Mahan, Friedrich Ratzel, Harold Mackinder, and Rudolf Kjellen), but its intellectual roots run deeper. The British discourse surrounding the Eastern Question, the 19th century debate over the fate of a weakening Ottoman Empire, contained all of the seeds of classical geopolitical thought even though the formal study of geopolitics would come later. Terms describing the conflict-prone borderlands of empire – “shatterzone,” “rimland,” and “pivot area” – may have been coined in the early 20th century, but their meanings and implications were understood by the partisans of the Eastern Question in the mid- and late-19th century.

I chose the period 1872-1878 because it provides a useful snapshot of domestic political tensions in British foreign policy that stretched across the 19th century. These six years saw Balkan uprisings against Ottoman rule and the Ottomans’ declining economic fortunes spark vigorous debates in London. The period was capped by the 1878 Congress of Berlin, which snuffed out pan-Slavism and ushered in a new era of British influence in Ottoman territory.

## Historiography

The literature on British-Ottoman relations in the late 19th century is vast. A university library catalogue search yielded 2,137 history books under the heading “Eastern Question,” demonstrating the breadth of interest in the broader theme. The traditional historiography on the topic, sparked by the end of World War I and the creation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, described a game of diplomatic chess played by rival Great Power chancelleries. The actions of the Sublime Port, let alone its subjects, did not feature prominently in this Anglo-centric “high politics” approach.<sup>1</sup> One alternative approach was to shift the main focus away from Britain and towards Russia. Books like B.H. Sumner’s *Russia and the Balkans 1870-1880* and Barbara Jelavich’s *Russia's Balkan Entanglements, 1806-1914* stand out in this genre. Other scholars thrust local and regional actors to the foreground, recasting figures like Muhammad Ali – previously considered pawns and puppets of empires – as skilled strategists playing their supposed masters off one another for personal gain.<sup>2</sup> British domestic politics, particularly the Disraeli-Gladstone drama, offered another rich source of analysis.<sup>3</sup> For some historians of the Balkans and the Middle East, the classical Eastern Question is merely a prelude to more important themes like nationalism and the impact of imperialism on 20th century state development.<sup>4</sup> The rise of cultural history ushered in a new field of inquiry within imperial studies focusing on the lives of ordinary citizens across Ottoman lands.<sup>5</sup>

## Gaps in the literature

Given the large volume of writing on the topic, what new material could possibly be unearthed or fresh perspective offered? Two gaps in the literature exist. First, there is a lack of analysis of how geopolitical concepts anchored Western discourse on the strategic importance of Ottoman territory. This provides an opportunity for a fresh look at old sources. Second, intellectual histories of geopolitics do not give sufficient credit to writings on the Eastern Question as a precursor to formal geopolitical thinking introduced by the British geographer Harold Mackinder and other founding fathers of the discipline.<sup>6</sup> The geopolitical rivalry of the Eastern Question

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<sup>1</sup> The giants of this genre included M.S. Anderson (*The Eastern Question, 1774-1923*. London: Macmillan, 1966) and J.A.R. Marriott (*The Eastern Question: An Historical Study in European Diplomacy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940).

<sup>2</sup> For examples of this perspective, see Leon Carl Brown’s *International Politics and the Middle East International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1984) and Efrain and Inari Karsh’s *Empires of the Sand: the Struggle for Mastery in the Middle East 1798-1923* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> R.W. Seton-Watson’s seminal 1935 book, *Gladstone, Disraeli, and the Eastern Question* (reprinted in New York: W.W. Norton, 1972) was updated in Milos Kovic’s *Disraeli and the Eastern Question* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Michelle Tusan’s *The British Empire and the Armenian Genocide: Humanitarianism and Imperial Politics from Gladstone to Churchill* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017) also examines developments in the Ottoman empire through the perspective of domestic British politics.

<sup>4</sup> David Fromkin’s *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Owl Books, 1989) is emblematic of this genre.

<sup>5</sup> Lucien J. Frary and Mara Kozelsky’s edited volume *Russian-Ottoman Borderlands: The Eastern Question Reconsidered* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014) is an example of this new wave of scholarship.

<sup>6</sup> Histories of the intellectual development of geopolitics often begin with Harold Mackinder (1861-1945) and his peers. Major works include Gerard Kearns’s *Geopolitics and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), Gerard Toal’s *Geopolitics Reader* (London: Routledge, 2006), and the biography of Mackinder written by William H. Parker (*Mackinder: Geography as an Aid to Statecraft*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982). More recently, Or

generated much writing on spatial concepts for which Mackinder and others would later create a vocabulary (“heartland,” “rimland, and “pivot area”). During the Victorian era, Britain conceived of the “Near East,” then defined as a single stretch of territory from the Balkans to Persia, as a strategic prize before the development of formal geopolitical thought or the discover of oil. This topic, which does not fit neatly into diplomatic history, geography, or cultural history, is ripe for further inquiry.

## Sources and methodology

My focus is on spatial concepts in the British discourse on the Eastern Question (for example the threat posed by “empty,” weakly governed territory). The historian Paul Auchterlonie has shown the importance of the Victorian press as a barometer of elite foreign policy opinion,<sup>7</sup> so I will examine newspapers and magazines in addition to books and political speeches. Not merely accounts of daily events but arenas for ideological combat, Victorian newspapers and magazines featured articles written by all sides of the Eastern Question debate: prime ministers, church figures, British envoys to the Sublime Port, and even Middle Eastern leaders. I will also examine private discourse (Cabinet meeting notes, diplomatic correspondence) to see if geopolitical concepts in the public sphere are reflected in the debate behind closed doors. I will scan sources to find terms with geopolitical and spatial connotations such as “strategic” and “pivot” and metaphors such as “great game.” The political geographer Gerard Toal has agreed to serve as an informal outside adviser for my research to help in the analysis of geopolitical discourse. My goal is to turn my MSt thesis into the beginning of a PhD dissertation that also makes use of Ottoman sources to tell the “other” side of the story during the same period, focusing on geopolitical narratives in the Ottoman empire.

### Sample list of primary sources

1. Speeches of Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli about Britain’s interest in the Near East
2. Speeches, essays, and pamphlets of opposition politicians like W.E. Gladstone
3. Newspapers and magazines including the *Times*, *Blackwood's Magazine*, *Contemporary Review*, *Fortnightly Review*, *Fraser's Magazine*, *Macmillan's Magazine*, and *National Review*. Mentions of the “Near East” in 19th century periodicals have been catalogued in publications such as W. H. Behn’s *Index Islamicus, 1665-1905: A Bibliography of Articles on Islamic Subjects in Periodicals and Other Collective Publications & 2 Supplements, 1665-1980* (Millersville, PA: Adiyok, 1989-1996) and many of these sources are housed at the University of Cambridge.
4. Cabinet meeting notes following key moments in Ottoman history from 1872 to 1878. For example, the Ottoman sovereign default of October 1875, the Herzegovina uprising

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Rosenboim explored the late 19th century roots of mid-20th century geopolitical thought in “Geopolitics and Empire: Visions of Regional World Order in the 1940s.” *Modern Intellectual History*, 12(2), 353-381. Another exploration of this topic can be found in David Deudney’s “Greater Britain or Greater Synthesis? Seeley, Mackinder, and Wells on Britain in the Global Industrial Era.” *Review of International Studies* 27.2 (2001): 187-208.

<sup>7</sup> Auchterlonie, Paul. “From the Eastern Question to the Death of General Gordon: Representations of the Middle East in the Victorian Periodical Press, 1876-1885.” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 28.1 (2001): 5-24.

of July 1875, the publication of Gladstone's *Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East* in 1876, and the start of the Russo-Turkish War in April 1877.

5. Diplomatic reports from the British mission in Istanbul, located in the UK National Archives.
6. Books like Sir G. Campbell's *A Handy Book on the Eastern Question* (London: Murray, 1876) and W. Denton's *The Christians of Turkey: Their Conditions under Mussulman Rule* (London: Dalday, Isbister and Co, 1876).

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