HENRY BULWER AND THE CONVENTION OF BALTA LIMAN

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In the 1830s a number of factors combined to produce British concern about the eastern Mediterranean area. Commercial interests in the Ottoman Empire were growing and communication lines to India ran through the area. The sultan sought to keep his exchequer in balance by increasing fees on commerce, to the growing annoyance of British traders. Concern about the fate of the Ottoman Empire was growing in London because of worry about possible foreign involvement. Two nations, the Russians, whose interest in the straits was nothing new, and the French, who had been expanding in North Africa, were feared. Normally Paris could be expected to cooperate against St. Petersburg, but the situation became more unsettling in the 1830s when the Egyptians, with at least tacit French support, threatened the sultan. This threat might mean expanded French influence and/or invitingly troubled waters for Russian angling. For Britain, then, a prosperous and friendly Ottoman Empire meant commercial profits, help in maintaining imperial communications, and blocking French and Russian ambitions in the eastern Mediterranean. A commercial convention that would reduce tariffs and fees paid by Britons while reforming Turkish practices in ways that would produce increasing revenues for the sultan was needed.

Such a treaty was not easily produced, but in August of 1838, the Convention of Balta Liman was signed. Accounts of its negotiation form part of the voluminous historiography of the Eastern Question, but the part played by Henry Lytton Bulwer has been consistently misinterpreted by historians. Bulwer himself is partially responsible for the misunderstanding, for in his own writings he seriously exaggerated his own importance.[1] But his egotism, which did get out of hand at times (he once proposed himself for the throne of Greece), should not be allowed to color our view of his part in the negotiations.[2]

The work of three historians, Philip E. Mosley, Sir Charles Webster, and Harold Temperley, is the basis for much of the continuing misunderstanding. Mosley considers the treaty anti-Turk and the result of Russophobia on the part of British diplomats from the Foreign Office to the field.[3] Webster and Temperley are less critical of the treaty but give the ambassador, Lord Ponsonby, credit for more than he did. Webster also regards Bulwer's role as minor and suggests that he was unaware of the political implications of the commercial question.[4] Temperley is more fair to Bulwer, calling his work in general "adroit," but in connection with the Convention of Balta Liman, he gives excessive credit to David Urquhart, who preceeded Bulwer as secretary of embassy in Constantinople. He also indicates that the counsul-general could have provided Ponsonby with almost all that Bulwer did and agrees with Webster that the ambassador took complete initiative in negotiating the treaty.[5] All three of these historians are at least partially wrong about Bulwer, but the essence of their ideas is repeated by Kenneth Bourne in his recent book on Lord Palmerston.[6]

Highlighting Bulwer's activities with reference to the background of the situation and the criticisms mentioned above will show many of the errors. It is usually difficult to

isolate the actions of a man in the second rank because at best only second hand accounts exist. The secondary figure's own later accounts, as shown by Bulwer's, are often less than trustworthy. But Bulwer's private first hand descriptions of what he was doing are available. Ponsonby, not known for his industry in everyday matters, used his subordinate's memoranda as the bulk of his dispatches to the Foreign Office concerning the negotiations. Bulwer's reports to the ambassador were intended to keep him informed of the progress of the negotiations, which he had to support with his influence at the Porte. Accuracy was important, for there were many who would have been happy for the chance to claim the sultan was being hoodwinked if the English agents told even slightly different tales. Nor are these reports marked by the patent hyperbole of Bulwer's published accounts. Ponsonby justified using Bulwer's reports without bothering to add much comment because Bulwer had prepared the treaty, "a work he has executed much better than I could do."[7]

The British policy of which the Convention of Balta Liman was a part developed slowly in the post-Napoleonic years, and attention to the East was sporadic before 1833. The Greek rebellion and the Russo-Turkish war in the 1820s saw indecision among the members of the Tory cabinet in London and little more policy than support for a small independent Greece which, it was assumed, would be dominated by Russia. In 1830 when the Whigs came to power with Lord Palmerston taking the Foreign Office, the chief overseas concern was the Belgian revolt. Although new at his job, Palmerston was quite successful in negotiating Belgian independence and in supporting constitutionalism in Portugal as well. The Quadruple Alliance of 1834 secured the latter and served as a liberal counter to the revival of conservative cooperation among Austria, Prussia, and Russia.

Trouble was brewing, however, in the Ottoman Empire, for Sultan Mahmud II had not given territory promised to Mehemet Ali, pasha of Egypt, in return for aid against the Greek revolt. In 1832 and 1833 the Egyptians took Palestine and Acre and moved on into Syria intending to reward themselves. Turkish forces sent to restore the situation were defeated, and Mehemet's son Ibrahim launched an invasion of Anatolia. When the sultan asked London for aid, Palmerston, restrained by hesitant colleagues, refused. Reluctantly Mahmud turned to Tsar Nicholas I, who promptly sent troops to protect Constantinople and warned off the Egyptians. At the Foreign Office and the Quai d'Orsay there was concern about the expansion of Russian power, and pressure was applied to settle the Turco-Egyptian fighting and get the Russians off Ottoman territory. Actually the tsar had no intention of occupying territory permanently or trying to break up the empire, but he did leave with a defensive alliance, the Treaty of Unkiar Skelessi. Although the treaty contained no military provision in violation of existing agreements, it left Russian influence paramount in Constantinople. The British and French were upset, and their disquiet was deepened by concern over the Austro-Russian Müchengrätz Agreement of September, 1833. Although this agreement was little more than an assertion of support for the status quo (the two did agree to consult on action if the Ottoman Empire started coming apart), hostility was assumed in the Western European capitals where the terms were not known. Palmerston, awake to danger in the East,

looked to his new ambassador, Ponsonby, to help restore British influence with the Porte. Although often too abrupt with the Turks, Ponsonby did eventually become very influential.

Mehemet Ali continued to make trouble for both Constantinople and London. By 1838 he had pushed as far into Arabia as the Persian Gulf, and the sultan's desire for revenge had become rabid. A Turkish military effort against the Egyptians was very likely to fail and bring Russina intervention under the Treaty of Unkiar Skelessi.

Concern was growing at the Foreign Office in London and not just over the danger of Russian intervention. In 1835 Mehemet had hindered a British effort to explore a line of communication from the Syrian coast down the Euphrates to the Persian Gulf and rejected the idea of a rail link from Cairo to the Red Sea. Rulers of small countries did not endear themselves to Lord Palmerston by interfering with English communications to India. The foreign secretary became increasingly convinced that his best move was to support reform and stability in Constantinople and defeat Mehemet by diplomacy. He would counter what he perceived to be a Russian push to the Eastern Mediterranean by supporting the integrity of the Ottoman Empire.

Economic reform and increased trade between England and Turkey could increase political stability and make an already good customer better. A commercial convention could also put pressure on Mehemet Ali, who would be legally bound to abide by the terms of any agreement signed by his overlord. As the pasha drew much revenue from controlling commercial monopolies, a feature of Turkish economic policy the British hoped to end, his exchequer was vulnerable to trade regulation, and his adherence to an Anglo-Turkish treaty could be enforced by the royal Navy in defense of British trade rights. The Capitulations, the agreement governing English trade in Turkey, had expired in 1834, but despite efforts by Ponsonby, a new convention had not been obtained.[1]

David Urquhart, who had been secretary of embassy at Constantinople from 1835 to 1837, had done some spade work, but due to his ego, Urquhart had been unwilling to act as a subordinate. His relations with Ponsonby quickly became so bad that the two communicated only through intermediaries. Despite Urquhart's knowledge of the East, Ponsonby would not employ him on official business, so although Urquhart was eager to see a commercial convention signed and had ideas that proved useful later, his mission was a failure. He went home to conduct a Russophobic propaganda campaign. Temperley gives him too much credit--left to Urquhart there would have been no treaty.[2]

Personal problems also came close to removing another useful man from the negotiations. Ponsonby was feuding with the very able consul-general, John Cartwright, and it was due to Bulwer's tact and persuasive power that Cartwright was ultimately included in preparing the treaty. Without Bulwer, it is unlikely that the ambassador and the consul-general would have gotten very far as a team.[3]

Sir Charles Webster suggests that Ponsonby was doing all that could be expected and that Bulwer actually contributed little. The failure to make much progress between 1834 and 1838, Webster believes, was based on three factors: the ambassador's plan to take leave of absence which, due to the fight with Urquhart, would leave no one on the scene to act; illness of the Turkish officials involved; and the need to

create the right political situation. He finds in none of this any reason to charge the British representative with a lack of energy. By 1838 the situation, no thanks to Ponsonby, was certainly propitious due to the sultan's eagerness to win English support against Mehemet Ali, but as will be seen, there were still problems. In three months, however, with Ponsonby involved in one of the major crises of the Eastern Question and Bulwer working on the treaty, it was ready to sign. Unquestionably Ponsonby's personal influence got the treaty ratified, but considering his rate of progress over the preceding several years, it seems unlikely he would have found the energy to work out the details in a matter of a few weeks by himself. Nor would he have let Cartwright do it.[11]

When Henry Bulwer arrived at Constantinople, May 1838, the situation was a mixture of threat and promise.[12] Mehemet Ali had just stated his intention of declaring his independence. Faced with the ultimate rebellion, the Five Powers (Britain, France, Russia, Austria, Prussia) had their representatives at Constantinople send a joint note of support to the sultan on July 27. It would be more than eighteen months before these difficulties were resolved. The process of resolution is not important here, but it is significant to note that Bulwer's work of writing and finalizing the commercial convention was done in an atmosphere of tension since Ponsonby's instructions were to maintain peace between sultan and pasha rather than to negotiate about commercial questions.[13]

The most serious commercial problems concerned duties, internal as well as external, and monopolies. The agreed upon ad valorem duty on goods entering Turkey was 3 percent, but to increase revenue a variety of transit and other changes had been added. British merchants, who were supposed to deal only with designated middlemen, had begun to move goods directly into the country and to trade in local products as well. They expected to pay only the original 3 percent even on Turkish goods sold in Turkey. Indigenous merchants paid much more and the established rules were being evaded by both sides long before the Capitulations expired in 1834. The sultan's grants of monopolies on the sale of certain items to selected individuals added to the confusion and British annoyance. London had urged reform. The Porte was, however, only interested in gleaning enough revenue to maintain a corrupt and inefficient administration without creating domestic strife by antagonizing the influential men who held monopolies. It was difficult to convince Turks who were not educated in Western European economic ideas that lower and standard duties and an end to monopolies would mean an increase in commerce and thus more revenue. Less just did not sound like more.[14]

Due to the efforts of those with vested interests in the existing commercial system and the government's concern that the British proposals would not produce enough revenue, the Turks vacillated. Consistent support for Bulwer came only from Reschid Pasha, minister of foreign affairs, whose career revolved around the effort to introduce basic reforms into Ottoman government. Bulwer clearly recognized that time was working against him, for as he wrote Ponsonby:

> the whole policy. . . [of the Ottomans] is frequently changed in a day by the rise or fall of a favorite, more especially, since many of the motives dependent on the State of Egypt and

> which now influence the friendly communications of the Porte may disappear--more especially also since the position of Reschid Pasha, the great promoter of more liberal notions in commerce as in other matters is more precarious.[15]

Bulwer's reaction was to move the talks away from the pressures and pleasures of the seraglio and Porte. Although his published description is in unfortunately histrionic terms, his meeting with Nourri Effendi, the minister of commerce, under a Persian tent pitched in a Bosporus valley resulted in agreement on the final terms.[16] The treaty lowered import duties and ended monopolistic policies, but as will be shown, the Turks insisted on some provisions that were not in their own best interest.

The pressure of time was not yet off. Reschid had been ordered on a mission to London, and the elimination of monopolies was being challenged as an interference with the sovereign right of the sultan to control the economic activities of his subjects. With Reschid gone, it would be difficult at best to get the treaty signed. Bulwer wrote a compromise paragraph recognizing the sultan's rights without accepting monopolies which, through the influence of Ponsonby, was included as one of a series of separate articles. A late night of drafting by Bulwer got the convention ready, and it was signed at Balta Liman on August 16, 1838, the day of Reschid's departure.[17]

Both Ponsonby and Palmerston were at pains to recognize and praise Bulwer's work. Ponsonby, who had at first not wanted any secretary after Urquhart, offered repeated and unprompted compliments and clearly did not feel that Bulwer's efforts had been negligible.[18] Palmerston wrote to Bulwer: "A thousand thanks for your treaty which as far as I can judge ...is a capo d'opera."[19] He also made flattering references in Parliament to the treaty.[20] Such remarks, public and private, indicate that those involved had a much higher regard for the secretary of embassy's part than have modern historians.

The Convention of Balta Liman and the men who were responsible for it have been called Russophobic and anti-Turk by Philip Mosley. Such descriptions are only partially accurate, as Bulwer's attitudes and activities demonstrate. His reports of the negotiations show an awareness of British commercial interests. They also show an understanding that the Porte could not be left in financial embarrassment during the time it would take the volume of trade to grow enough for revenue to return to its original level. "It is but fair ..." he wrote, "to take these things into consideration."[21]

Trade on both sides increased after 1838, but in comparison the British did gain more than the Turks. There were several reasons for the advantage other than hostility toward Turkey, which British policy was to support. As the greatest industrial power of the day, Britain was likely to gain significantly any time her goods got freer access to an area. There were also faults in the treaty. Export duties were set as 9 percent, high enough to discourage trade, and internal transit fees were retained. Bulwer worked to change both of these points and agreed to their being included only because the Turks insisted and the negotiations had to be

completed before Reschid left the country. The Turks were too fearful of not having adequate revenue to yield on points concerning their own merchandise, but too eager to get British backing against Mehemet Ali not to agree to what the English wanted for their goods.[22] However imperfect, the convention was not anti-Turkish. London's motives were commercial; not imperialistic, and the Turks needed British technology if their economy was to modernize.[23] The British hoped for comprehensive reform in the Ottoman Empire but little was accomplished. Without significant reform in many areas, no commercial treaty was going to do much for Turkey. With more than a little truth, Bulwer later wrote of the situation: "There is one enemy...from which we can never protect a country; that is--itself."[24]

There is more truth to the assertion that the convention was anti-Russian. Concern about Russian influence in the Levant and along the northwestern border of India had influenced British attitudes almost from the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Elimination of the Treaty of Unkiar Skelessi was one of Palmerston's main policies. Turkey could supply products to replace some Russian exports to Britain, and if a convention forged the iron bonds of profit between the Turks and British, the sultan was more likely to look to London than St. Petersburg for aid and advice.

Such results would have pleased many English diplomats and politicians, but despite the widespread Russophobia of the late 1830s, many of those involved in making this treaty were flexible about relations with the tsar. Ponsonby was doggedly hostile to Russia. Palmerston was less so. He had unofficially been involved for several years in an anti-Russian publicity campaign and was very suspicious of the tsar's intentions. But he had found a way out of the trouble over the seizure of the Vixen by working with the Russians, and was not unaware that further cooperation might provide the means to curb the ambitions of Mehemet Ali if France and Austria remained dilatory. Anglo-Russian arrangements, in fact, proved to be the answer to the Egyptian problem in 1839-40. The members of the government who most objected to cooperation with Russia, led by Lords Holland and Clarendon, were more concerned about separation from France than connection to Russia.[25] Bulwer, although he had spoken in Parliament against Russian activities in Poland, asked for and got his next assignment in St. Petersburg (illness kept him from taking the post), and he did not subscribe to the Russophobia of the period.[26] Mosley's argument is an overstatement; the treaty was first of all economic and only secondarily anti-Russian.

The final critical comment that deserves notice is Webster's remark that Bulwer was politically ignorant of the situation in Constantinople. Bulwer made the mistake of overestimating Mehemet Ali's strength at first, but his reports were spiced with comments about the impact of the convention on the struggle between pasha and sultan. He also clearly understood the importance of political pressure in getting the treaty ratified. He was not an expert on Turkish politics, but he knew what was needed to get his job done.[27]

If the negotiations were to be described in military terms, then Bulwer was the field commander, Ponsonby the tactician, and Palmerston the strategist. All three were needed, and if Bulwer were the least important, he was nonetheless quite significant. David Urquhart was better known

and knew much more about the East, but where Urquhart's personal qualities caused him to fail, Bulwer's tact and diligence got the job done. Given British policy, which mixed the desire for commercial advantage with the desire to support and strengthen the government of the sultan, combined with Turkish resistance to modern economic doctrine, the Convention of Balta Liman was well balanced. Bulwer deserved the praise that both Ponsonby and Palmerston gave him, but which modern historians have withheld.

NOTES

[1]Sir Henry Lytton Bulwer, The Life of Henry John Temple, Viscount Palmerston 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1871) 2: 228-34; [Henry Lytton Bulwer], "Mehemet Ali, Lord Palmerston, Russia, and France," Edinburgh Review, 72 (Jan., 1841): 279-95.

[2]For the treaty's importance see Frank E. Bailey, British Policy and the Turkish Reform Movement (New York: Fertig, Howard, Inc., 1970; orig. 1942), pp. 72-76, 126. The British convention promptly became the model for treaties made with Turkey by Austria and France and later by Prussia, China, and Russia. See also Donald Southgate, "The Most English Minister ...": The Policies and Politics of Palmerston (London, MacMillan, 1966), p. 121.

[3]Philip E. Mosley, Russian Diplomacy and the Opening of the Eastern Question in 1838 and 1839 (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1934), p. 93.

[4]Sir Charles Webster, The Foreign Policy of Palmerston, 1830-1841, 2 vols. (London: G. Bell, 1951), 2: 548, 555.

[5]Harold H. V. Temperley, England and the Near East: The Crimea (New York, Archon Books, 1964), pp. 34-36.

[6]Kenneth Bourne, Palmerston: The Early Years (New York: Free Press, 1982), p. 564.

[7]Ponsonby to Palmerston, No. 190, 19 Aug. 1838, Great Britain, Public Record Office, Foreign Office (hereafter cited as PRO, F.O.), 78/332; see also no. 174, 25 July 1838, PRO, F.O. 78/332.

[8]Sir Llewellyn Woodward, The Age of Reform, 1815-1870, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962), 226-38; Bourne, 567, 563; William Langer, Political and Social Upheaval, 1832-52 (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 283-300.

[9]William Langer's suggestion in Political and Social Upheaval, p. 297, that Urquhart was heavily involved in getting the treaty signed seems to be without foundation. For details of Urquhart's activities see John H. Gleason, The Genesis of Russophobia in Great Britain (New York: Octagon Press, 1972; orig. 1950), pp. 190-91; Temperley, p. 34-36, 408 n.68.

[10]Bulwer, Palmerston, 2: 228-29; Sir Charles Webster, "Urquhart, Ponsonby, and Palmerston," English Historical Review, 67 (July, 1947): 327-32; G.H. Bolsover, "Urquhart and the Eastern Question, 1833-1837, A Study in Publicity and Diplomacy," Journal of Modern History, 8 (Dec., 1936): 459-60.

[11]Webster, Policy of Palmerston, 2: 552-54; Bulwer, Palmerston, 2: 227; Temperley, pp. 34-55; Charles White, Three Years in Constantinople or Domestic Manners of the Turks in 1844, 3 vols. (London, 1845), 1: 137-38.

[12]Ponsonby to Palmerston, No. 160, 25 June, 1838, PRO, F.O. 78/331 and No. 180, 30 July, 1838, PRO, F.O. 78/332; C.W. Crawley, "Anglo-Russian Relations 1815-1840," Cambridge

Historical Journal, 3 (1929): 48; Bulwer, Palmerston, 2: 227.

[13]Bailey, p. 168.

[14]Bulwer to Ponsonby, 18 July 1838, in Ponsonby to Palmerston, No. 174, 25 July, 1838, PRO, F.O. 78/332; Frank E. Bailey, "The Economics of British Foreign Policy, 1825-50," Journal of Modern History, 12 (Dec., 1940): 481.

[15]Bulwer to Ponsonby, 18 July 1838, in Ponsonby to Palmerston, No. 174, 25 July 1838, PRO, F.O. 78/332.

[16]Bulwer, Palmerston, 2: 231.

[17]Bulwer to Ponsonby, 19 August 1838, in Ponsonby to Palmerston, No. 190, 19 August 1838, PRO, F.O. 78/332.

[18]Ponsonby to Palmerston, No. 190, 19 August 1838 and No. 219, 13 October 1838, PRO, F.O. 78/332.

[19]Palmerston to Bulwer, 13 September 1838, in Bulwer, Palmerston, 2: 250.

[20]Ibid., p. 223. No specific reference to Bulwer can be found but both Palmerston and Melbourne spoke well of the treaty: Hansard's Parliamentary Debates, 3rd Series (Lords), 65 (11 February 1839): 205; (Commons) 52 (13 February 1840): 612.

[21]Bulwer to Ponsonby, 19 August 1938, in Ponsonby to Palmerston, No. 190, 19 August 1838, PRO, F.O. 78/332.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Winfried Baumgart, Imperialism, trans. by Ben V. Mast (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), p. 138.

[24][Bulwer], "Mehemet Ali, Lord Palmerston, Russia and France," p. 290.

[25]Bourne, pp. 564, 580; Gleason, pp. 237-39.

[26]Bulwer to Granville, 5 January, 1839, Granville Papers, P.R.O. 30/29, Box 14/12, Item 9.

[27]Bulwer to Ponsonby, 18 July 1838, in Ponsonby to Palmerston, No. 174, 25 July 1838, PRO, F.O. 78/332; Bulwer to Palmerston, 28 August 1838, in Bulwer, Palmerston 2: 248-50.