

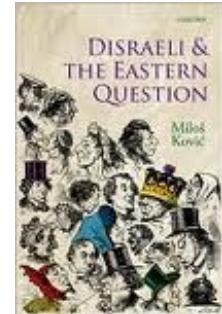
Book Review: Disraeli and The Eastern Question

Andrew Duke reviews a formidable book on the origins and form of Benjamin Disraeli's policies on the 'Eastern Question', focusing on his period as Prime Minister and the 'Great' Eastern Crisis of 1875-78.

Disraeli and the Eastern Question. Milos Kovic. [Oxford University Press](#). January 2011.

The events of the Bosnian wars have returned to the spotlight following the recent [arrest of Ratko Mladic](#). The latent tensions that resurfaced during the 1990s echo back to the 'Balkan Powder Keg' that set off the First World War, and further back to the 'Eastern Question' of the nineteenth century. As Europe grappled with Balkan nationalism and the slow disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, the Balkans' tangled social, religious and economic web sparked a local conflict that drew in the Great Powers and threatened a general European war, becoming the archetypal Balkan crisis.

Disraeli & The Eastern Question by Milos Kovic describes the origins and form of Benjamin Disraeli's policies on the 'Eastern Question', focusing on his period as Prime Minister and the 'Great' Eastern Crisis of 1875-78. As Ottoman collapse seemed imminent, Europe debated what to do with its turbulent Balkan provinces: should these be divided amongst the European powers, granted independence, or stay under Ottoman rule? Disraeli favoured the last option. As power concentrated in his hands, his policy was British policy, and took Britain close to war with Russia which sought territorial expansion at Ottoman expense.



The first part of the book deals with Disraeli's background and his attitudes towards the East. Converting to Christianity from Judaism as an adolescent, Disraeli developed Turkophile instincts after touring the East as a young man and writing pop-fiction featuring a crusading hero in the near east. The passages on Disraeli's fiction are the book's most difficult, due largely to the inaccessible nature of Disraeli's prose to the modern reader. Kovic argues these experiences influenced Disraeli's policies, remaining rooted in a conservative aristocratic perception of the Ottoman Empire and an Orientalised view of the Eastern other.

Having discussed this at length, Kovic eventually concludes that Disraeli's policy was mostly determined not by personal experience but rather by the 'instinct of power': a realist assessment that Ottoman rule preserved the European balance of power and best protected British interests by keeping Russia out of the Mediterranean.

The second half of the book follows Disraeli's management of the Eastern Crisis during 1875-78. This culminated in popular uprisings across the Balkans and war between Russia and the Ottoman Empire. In the end Disraeli's skilful diplomacy upended Russia's military victory over the Ottomans to secure a peace distinctly to Britain's advantage.

The diplomatic intrigues will absorb foreign policy historians, but the fine detail is interwoven with portraits of the key personalities and the history of ideas to stay engaging for other readers. The policies of Disraeli and his bitter opponent, Gladstone, are well placed in the schools of realist and idealist international relations. Gladstone saw the Eastern Question (and politics generally) not through the 'instinct of power', but as a moral and religious duty to help the Balkans achieve a measure of independence. Lord Derby, Disraeli's key collaborator as Foreign Secretary, sought to avoid war at all costs. The pair broke over Disraeli's belligerent stance, politics that Derby saw as driven by pursuit of personal glory and what Disraeli himself called his "love of fame".

There are some interesting modern parallels to draw. Disraeli's running of foreign policy with Derby (and then Salisbury) to the virtual exclusion of Cabinet; Disraeli's preoccupation and disdain for public opinion against his policies; and his attempts to manage the press, all have parallels in recent British politics. Other threads are more surprising, such as Disraeli's careful cultivation of relations with Queen Victoria and use of her influence as a final weapon to overpower political resistance.

Based on Kovic's PhD thesis, the book's scholarship is formidable, an array of Disraeli's correspondence having been consulted and referenced. The resulting work is admirable from an academic point of view, and has much to offer students of history, politics, and those interested in the origins of the Balkan questions which remain important in European politics to the present day.

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