Conversations on Anglo-Russian Relations in 1838

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THE archives of both the British and the Russian governments reveal that throughout the summer of 1838 serious tension existed in Anglo-Russian relations. Economic factors and imperialist rivalry, it appears, contributed markedly to this tension and to the failure of European statesmen to forestall through diplomacy the development of what was to be in 1839–41 Europe's most serious international crisis in the period between the close of the Napoleonic era and the eve of the Crimean war. In 1838 Englishmen were convinced that the Russian government was systematically endeavouring 'to shut out the commerce and thus to cripple the resources of England'. Furthermore, Englishmen insisted that Russia was pursuing an aggressive policy in Turkey, they were apprehensive of Russo-Egyptian co-operation for the partition of the Near East, and they seriously feared the extension of Russian influence in the direction of India. Russians, on the other hand, believed that their economic institutions were being endangered by British ideas and policies, that British statesmen were imbued with strong anti-Russian prejudices, that British agents were attempting to undermine Russian influence in the Near East, and that the British government had aggressive intentions in Persia and Afghanistan.

Tension in Anglo-Russian relations became particularly acute early in the summer of 1838 after Mehemet Ali Pasha of Egypt had moved to announce his intention of declaring the independence of Egypt from Turkey. Eager to avoid a crisis both the British and Russian governments at that time took action in opposing the move of the pasha. After that move had been announced in England Lord Palmerston, the British foreign secretary, ventured to suggest consideration of the Eastern question in a conference of representatives of the great Powers at London. Undoubtedly it was tension in Anglo-Russian relations and mutual distrust between British and Russian statesmen which contributed most directly to the failure of this suggestion and to the drifting of Europe into the second Turco-Egyptian crisis. An idea of how great was the handicap of tension and suspicion in Anglo-Russian relations in 1838 may be gained very clearly from the document quoted below, which records frank conversations between the British ambassador to Austria, the Russian foreign secretary, and the Austrian chancellor on the occasion of the coronation of the Austrian Emperor Ferdinand with the crown of Lombardy and Venetia.

FREDERICK STANLEY RODKEY.

[1] The material for this 'Note and Document' was gathered while the writer was serving as Fellow of the Social Science Research Council of the U.S.A.

Sir Frederick Lamb's 'Conversation with Count Nesselrode and Prince Metternich' at Milan on 3 September 1838.[1]

I [Lamb] began by communicating to Count Nesselrode Lord Palmerston's dispatch No. 13 of 27 July [1838] to Mr. Aston [British chargé at Vienna] with which he [Nesselrode] was in the highest degree content, expressing only a hope that his Lordship would persist in the [moderate] opinions therein expressed, of which I did not admit that a doubt could reasonably be entertained, remarking that Lord Palmerston would be found as consistent in maintaining these opinions, which now met the concurrence of the three [Eastern] courts [on Turkish affairs], as he had been when they were repugnant to them, and pointing out that he was the only one who stood at this moment on the same ground which he had taken at the beginning [of the Turco-Egyptian crisis in 1833].

After this the Count asked permission to enter more at large into the subject of the relations between the two countries [Great Britain and Russia], avowing that they were not what he wished them to be, and expressing his regret that all the endeavours they [the Russians] had used through Lord Durham and other channels to place them upon a better footing had been unsuccessful.

I replied that the endeavours he alluded to could not succeed because they had never gone to the bottom of the sore, but had aimed only at patching and plastering—That there were moments when it was not safe to probe wounds too deeply, but that at others, the operation might be attended with salutary effects, and that if he thought this moment to be arrived I had no objection to lay open to him the root of the alienation between the Two Countries and the remedies.

He asked me to proceed, which I did, saying, We see in you the great civilizing Power of the East, a part which should naturally have been shared by Austria, but which for nearly a century she has unwisely abandoned to you. Your march is irresistible within certain bounds, because it is that of civilization itself—but its progress depends upon the encouragement you give to Industry and Production, and for this you have need of a great Commercial Firm which shall take your produce off your hands. We are that Firm, and in dealing with us you have the advantage of having to do with an immense Capitalist, and not with petty Retailers. The real interests therefore of the Two Countries are identic,—but for us to fulfill our part, We stand in need of security. We must not be disquieted, and in the first place not upon our Indian Frontier. I will not pretend to say whether the transactions there have arisen from the Russian Government or from the indiscreet zeal of its agents, nor whether they may have been exaggerated in the reports of our own, but I tell you that We are put upon the alert there, and that our being so is attributed by us to Russia—a state of things incompatible with a good understanding with Her.

. . . I asked for no details and for no decision . . ., if they [the Russians] would now unite with us to check the enterprises of the Shah [of Persia], if they would adopt the principle of the status quo for Persia as they had done for Europe, this good understanding might in so far become possible, and if not—not.

[1] An enclosure with Lamb to Palmerston, no. 72, 8 September 1838, Public Record Office MSS., Austria, 7/272. (Received at Foreign Office 27 September 1838.)

I then told him that if he allowed me, I would pass to a subject of nearer interest and one rather more delicate to touch upon—The relations of the Two Countries with the Porte. I then went into the history of the Transactions which had led to the Russian Expedition of 1833, avowing that for half a century England appeared to have been insensible to the interest she had in maintaining the Ottoman Empire, and that it had required the presence of a Russian Corps in the Bosphorus to arouse her to it.

What could we do ? he answered, it was impossible for us to stand by and see the Sultan overthrown, and to risk the results which would have ensued.

I am glad, I replied, that you understand it so. I avow that your expedition preserved the Sultan on his throne, but it is permissible to those who threw so great a game into your hands to have felt displeasure when you profited by it, and not the less so, if the occasion was furnished to you in some measure by their own fault. These things are now passed, and it depends only on yourselves to establish a perfect understanding upon this great question in all its branches. With regard to Mehemet Ali it already exists. One branch alone would have admitted of no concert or compromise. It was that of Circassia—You see that the British Government instead of pressing that point, does its utmost to keep it quiet. There is no other question the solution of which does not depend upon yourselves. The Treaty of Unkiar Skelessi will shortly expire—all depends upon the course you shall pursue when that moment arrives.

He remarked that it had been made for eight years.

Be it so, I said, We see in it no positive advantage to you except in the provision which secures the Neutrality of the Passage of the Canal of Constantinople as long as the Porte is at peace. Now this principle is our own. Let it be extended generally to all nations instead of being secured to you exclusively, and there will remain no difference between us.

Count Nesselrode urged in reply that the Treaty did not secure to Russia a right to pass her fleet through the Dardanelles.

I know it, I replied, it only gives her security against attacks, the Porte being neutral—and if we are to be satisfied, this same security must be extended to others against attack from her under the same circumstances. The present state of things wounds our amour propre, more perhaps than it affects our interests, nor should we feel the least objection to a part of your Fleet acting in concert with the English and French squadrons in the Levant.

He started at this, and asked if it might be depended upon, and why it had not been said to Count Pozzo-di-Borgo [the Russian Ambassador at London].

I replied that I was not authorized to make him an official communication upon the subject, but that I would answer for procuring him one, if it would give him pleasure, and that I thought it probable that it might have already been made to Count Pozzo ;—equality of action, I continued, is our principle, and as we are ready to admit it by Sea, We should also require it by land ; so that if military operations became necessary, they might be undertaken by the Forces of some other Power,—Austria if you please, conjointly with those of Russia.

He expressed doubts as to the practicability of this, adding that the dispatch which had been communicated to me at Töplitz had been ill-received in London, where the intention expressed on the part of Russia of giving military assistance if called upon to the Sultan had been attributed to sinister motives.

Do not you see, I replied, in this, a confirmation of what I have stated. Our object is to give support to the Sultan, but we wish that support to be the joint work of all the Powers not that of a single one. I have put the thing into your hands, I added, and if you wish to be well with us, you now know the way; there is no other, it is for you to decide whether to take it or not.

And if we were to take it, he asked, should we find Lord Palmerston less full of prejudices against us, or your agents less occupied in giving false and odious interpretations to our conduct?

I know not, I said, what it is you impute to Lord Palmerston, but this I can answer for, that a change in your system would alter the opinion of England, by which the Minister and the Agents subordinate to him are equally directed.

He ended by requesting that the overture for the union of a Russian Squadron to those of England and France in the Levant might be made to Count Pozzo-di-Borgo, concluding by the words 'let Lord Palmerston talk less to France and more to us and things will go better', which I did not let pass without replying that much of his Lordship's communications with France were for the general benefit, and as much for that of Russia as of ourselves . . .

In the course of this conversation Count Nesselrode had expressed to me that he had no apprehension of war between the two countries, their interests being too closely united, but that the existing coldness and suspicion were irksome and inconvenient to them, and might end by becoming dangerous.

From Count Nesselrode I went straight to Prince Metternich, and repeated to him as nearly as I could all that had passed.

He shrunk at my observation upon Austria but let me conclude without putting in a word. He then rose, and taking me warmly by both hands, said, that in the system I had developed, he was entirely with us, and would give it both publickly and privately every assistance in his power. That if Count Nesselrode failed to urge it upon the Emperor of Russia, he would himself take care this should be done; and with regard to the Eastern Frontier of Persia he said we were quite right in maintaining the Independence of the States existing between it and our Indian Possessions, and that he implored us not to lose sight of that object. He rejected the idea of an exclusive Austrian Expedition to Syria,—the magnitude of which he regards as far exceeding the means at their disposal, but he was silent as to their participation in a combined operation.

Count Nesselrode was then announced and I left him.

When I saw the Prince again he told me that Count Nesselrode was much pleased with our conversation, but had expressed doubts whether Lord Palmerston's views and conduct would be found to coincide with the sentiments I had expressed, to which the Prince had answered by recommending that the experiment should be made . . . .