

Lesson 7: The Eastern Question

Lesson 7: Video Lecture

Brainstorming Question

- What do you know about the “Eastern Question”?
- What were the causes and results of the two Balkan Wars?
- What were the motives behind Russian ambitions in the Balkans?

Competencies

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

Lesson Overview

The "Eastern Question" refers to the events and the complex set of dynamics related to Europe's experience of and stake in the decline in political, military and economic power and regional significance of the Ottoman Empire from the latter half of the eighteenth century to the formation of modern Turkey in 1923. The **Balkan Wars** were a series of two conflicts that took place in the [Balkan states](#) in 1912 and 1913.

1. The Eastern Question

he “Eastern Question” meant what would happen to the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans and elsewhere as Ottoman power declined. In the Balkans, the Ottoman Empire was threatened by the militancy of Balkan national movements, backed usually by Russia. In particular, the Eastern Question was an issue of political and economic instability in the Ottoman Empire from the late 18th to early 20th centuries. Moreover, it was the main cause of the subsequent strategic competition and political considerations of the European great powers in the region.



Map of Balkan Region

Source: Grade 12 History Text Book, page- 21

As the collapse of the Ottoman Empire approached, the European powers engaged in a power struggle to safeguard their military, strategic and commercial interests in the Ottoman domains. The decline of the Ottoman Empire benefited Imperial Russia; on the other hand, Austria-Hungary and the United Kingdom demanded the Empire's preservation as being in their best interests.

In the 1870s, the hardships of the Ottomans had increased; their treasury was empty, and they faced insurrections not only in Herzegovina and Bulgaria, but also in Serbia and Montenegro. However, the Ottoman Empire managed to crush the insurgents in August 1876. On the other hand, Russia now intended to enter the conflict on the side of the rebels, using rumors of Ottoman atrocities against the rebellious population as an excuse.

In April 1877, Russia declared war against the Ottoman Empire. It had effectively secured Austrian neutrality with the Reichstadt Agreement of July 1876, under which Ottoman territories captured during the war would be partitioned between the Russian and Austria-Hungarian Empires, with the latter obtaining Bosnia and Herzegovina. Britain did not involve itself in the conflict. However, when Russia threatened to conquer Constantinople (now Istanbul), Britain urged Austria and Germany to ally with it against Russia. Russia negotiated peace through the Treaty of San Stefano (3 March 1878), which stipulated independence for Romania, Serbia, and Montenegro; autonomy for Bulgaria; reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina; the ceding of Debruja and parts of Armenia; and a large indemnity to Russia. This would give Russia great influence in Southeastern Europe, as it could dominate the newly independent states.

However, to reduce these advantages to Russia, the Great Powers (especially Britain) insisted on a thorough revision of the Treaty of San Stefano. At the Treaty of Berlin on July 13, 1878, the boundaries of the new states were adjusted in the Ottoman Empire's favor.

Bulgaria was divided into two states (Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia), as it was feared that a single state would be susceptible to Russian domination. Bosnia and Herzegovina were transferred to Austrian control. Later, Austria-Hungary took advantage of the Ottoman crisis to annex the two provinces in 1908. This act outraged Pan-Slav nationalists in Serbia, who had long seen Serbia and anticipated a merger with Bosnia in a union of the southern Slavs. This eventually became an immediate cause of World War I.

Germany drew away from Russia and became closer to Austria-Hungary, with whom it concluded the Dual Alliance in 1879. Germany was also closely allied with the Ottoman Empire. In return, the German government took over the reorganization of the Ottoman military and financial systems. It received several commercial concessions, including permission to build the Baghdad Railway, which secured for them access to several important economic markets and opened the potential for German entry into the Persian Gulf area, then controlled by Britain. German interests were driven not only by commercial interests, but also by a burgeoning rivalry with Britain and France. Meanwhile, Britain agreed to the Entente Cordiale with France in 1904, thereby resolving differences between the two countries over international affairs. Britain also made peace with Russia in 1907 with the Anglo-Russian Entente.

1.1 Balkan Wars (1912-1913)

The Balkan Wars were two successive military conflicts that took place in the Balkan Peninsula in 1912 and 1913 that deprived the Ottoman Empire of all its remaining territory in Europe except part of Thrace and the city of Adrianople.

The First Balkan War began in the Balkans when Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, and Greece joined forces to attack the Ottoman Empire. By the early 20th century, Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro and Serbia had achieved independence from the Ottoman Empire, but large elements of their ethnic populations remained under Ottoman rule. In 1912, these countries formed the Balkan League with Russian support to take Macedonia away from Turkey.

The First Balkan War began on October 8, 1912, and the Balkan allies were soon victorious. The Turkish collapse was so complete that an armistice was signed on December 3, 1912. A peace conference began in London, but, after a coup d'état by the Young Turks in Constantinople in January 1913, war with the Ottomans continued. Again, the allies were victorious: Ioánnina fell to the Greeks and Adrianople to the Bulgarians. Under a peace treaty signed in London on May 30, 1913, the Ottoman Empire lost almost all of its remaining European territory, including all of Macedonia and Albania. Albanian independence was insisted upon by the European powers, and Macedonia was to be divided among the Balkan allies.

The Second Balkan War erupted when the Balkan allies Serbia, Greece, and Bulgaria, quarreled among themselves over the partitioning of their conquests in Macedonia. The result was a resumption of hostilities between Bulgaria, on the one hand, and Serbia and Greece, which were joined by Romania, on the other. Serbia and Greece allied against

Bulgaria, and the war began on the night of June 29–30, 1913, when King Ferdinand of Bulgaria ordered his troops to attack Serbian and Greek forces in Macedonia. Serbian and Greek forces were later joined by Romania to attack Bulgaria. The Ottoman Empire also attacked Bulgaria and advanced in Thrace, regaining Adrianople. On July 30, they concluded an armistice to end hostilities, and the Treaty of Bucharest was signed between the combatants on August 10, 1913. Under the terms of the treaty, Greece and Serbia divided most of Macedonia between themselves, leaving Bulgaria with only a small part of the region. The Balkan Wars were marked by ethnic cleansing, with all parties being responsible for grave atrocities against civilians. As a result of the Balkan Wars, Greece gained southern Macedonia as well as the island of Crete. Serbia gained the Kosovo region and extended into northern and central Macedonia. Albania was made an independent state by a German prince.

The most alarming aspect of the war was the growth of tension between Austria-Hungary and Serbia. Serbia had extensive claims upon Albanian territory. Having obtained an assurance of German support, Austria-Hungary delivered an ultimatum on October 17, 1913, to force Serbia to withdraw from the Albanian borderlands. The conflict between Austria-Hungary and Serbia was aggravated by the assassination of the Austrian prince, Franz Ferdinand by a Serb nationalist named Gavrilo Princip on June 28, 1914, in Sarajevo, capital of Bosnia. This action convinced Austro-Hungarian to attack Serbia to crush Serbia's independence was the only solution

Key Concepts and Terminology

Eastern Question

The **Eastern question** was the issue of the political and economic instability in the [Ottoman Empire](#) from the late 18th to early 20th centuries and the subsequent strategic competition and political considerations of the European [great powers](#) in light of this. Characterized as the "[sick man of Europe](#)", the relative weakening of the empire's military strength in the second half of the eighteenth century threatened to undermine the fragile [balance of power](#) system largely shaped by the [Concert of Europe](#). The Eastern question encompassed myriad interrelated elements: Ottoman military defeats, Ottoman institutional insolvency, the ongoing Ottoman political and economic modernization programme, the rise of ethno-religious nationalism in its provinces, and Great Power rivalries.