

The Midlothian Election Campaigns of 1879-80 and the Ottoman Empire

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As a fourth time Prime minister, William E. Gladstone was a dominant figure in shaping the British foreign policy. The Eastern Question and the Ottoman Empire were always important in the long life of the Grand Old Man. Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli was great rivals on the political arena and had deeply personal political struggle throughout the 1870s. In 1879, Gladstone's Midlothian campaigns and the following general election of 1880 influenced the nature of British party politics as well as the British politicians' approaches to national elections. On 8 March 1880, the intended dissolution of the second Disraeli Ministry was announced. In that respect, this early dissolution can be assessed as an informal victory of Gladstone and evidence for having the weight of foreign issues on his new cabinet's political agenda. Following Disraeli's call for an election, Gladstone started his second Midlothian campaign on 16 March 1880 with a journey to Edinburgh from London.

It is logical to analyse the features of the Midlothian as to its essentiality for Gladstone's role during the Eastern Question. Particularly, the importance of the campaign for this research comes from its speciality following a national awakening. For that reason, it is crucial to examine Gladstone's political stances throughout the campaign. By the same token, this paper also seeks to find answers to the questions as to what extent did Gladstone refer to his Eastern Question campaign and how can his policy be defined; 'Political opportunism' or 'public trust in a politician'?

There is little doubt that economic and imperial considerations formed the foundation of British foreign policy towards the Ottoman Empire. A broader

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framework, however, was implemented due to the shadow of ‘The Eastern Question’; a shadow which influenced the attitudes of statesmen throughout the nineteenth century. Traditionally, the Eastern Question is a broad term; it describes the events and line of vision concerning the fate of the weakened Ottoman Empire, with particular regard to her Balkan and Middle Eastern territories. The matter of the guardianship of the Ottoman provinces (in order to secure passage between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean), otherwise known as the ‘Great Game’, enhanced the importance of the Eastern Question.

Beside the economic and political underpinnings, one significant aspect of British policy towards the Porte was the status of Christian subjects under Turkish rule. During the longest century of the Ottoman Empire In the meantime, Anglo-Ottoman diplomatic relations developed. The nature and scope of Ottoman foreign affairs had been limited to European imperial interests, vis-à-vis one another, and their determination to dominate Eastern affairs.

The fourth son of the merchant John Gladstone, William Ewart Gladstone was born on 29 December 1809 in Liverpool. The family’s Scottish ancestry meant that William was brought up in the Evangelical tradition, and his strong Christian values remained a constant throughout his life. During William’s early childhood, his father enhanced both the economic well-being and social status of his family through business and political engagements.² Sir John Gladstone was one of the financial supporters of the Tory statesman George Canning and he chaired the election committee which assured Canning’s success in Liverpool. Sir John’s personal achievements were an ‘inspiring image’ for his sons, particularly for his youngest.³

² S. G. Checkland, *The Gladstones, a Family Bibliography 1764-1851*, (Cambridge: C.U.P, 1971), p. 93.

³ Richard Shannon, *Gladstone: God and Politics*, (London: Continuum Books, 2007), p. 3.

Gladstone developed a deep enthusiasm for Greek ethnology and literature, and the subjects of Homer and religion became an intertwined ‘central intellectual preoccupation’ of his life.⁴ He regularly read studies on history, politics, and culture, including Homer, Cicero, Herodotus, David Hume and Edward Gibbon. Although he assessed Hume to be ‘greater’ historian than Gibbon, whose style he considered to be ‘highly ornamented’⁵, it is clear that Gibbon’s work was to be significantly influential as it inspired Gladstone to read and consider Gibbon’s account of Mahomet.⁶

Gladstone had always regarded the Ottoman nation states with ethnic-religious differences independently from the Sublime Porte’s Islamic character of the state. Concerned about the conquering dominant Turks, he defined the existence of the Turkish government and the Turkish race in the European provinces of the Ottoman Empire to be ‘very peculiar and in an unexemplified condition.’⁷ To Gladstone, absolute power was established under the direct government of the Turks in a ‘wretched system’ despite the socio-ethnic structure of the society and the number of different -religious identities.⁸

While this statement has racist overtones, it is evident that this was an expression of a loss of confidence and trust towards Ottoman provincial governors. The following question arises: how did Gladstone become convinced that the Turkish government was unable to adapt itself to the modernization process, and what was the nature of the compromise in terms of her Christian subjects that she was obliged to make? It is nevertheless true that the Crimean

⁴ David Bebbington, *The Mind of Gladstone: Religion, Homer and Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

⁵ Diary entry for 12 March 1827, M. R. D. Foot and H. C. G. Matthew (eds.), *The Gladstone Diaries*, vol. i., p. 105.

⁶ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and the Fall of the Roman Empire*, Volumes I–VI (London: Strahan & Cadell, 1776–1788). See his summary of chapters in the Gladstone Papers (hereafter GP), located at the British Library (hereafter BL), BL Add MS 44717 fol.64, ‘Epitome of Gibbon’s Fall and Decline of the Roman Empire.’, See ‘Diary entry for 3 February 1827, M. R. D. Foot and H. C. G. Matthew (eds.), *The Gladstone Diaries*, vol. I, p. 104.

⁷ William E. Gladstone, *The Slavonic provinces of the Ottoman Empire*, (London, 1877), p. 5.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 16

War, and the subsequent humanitarian questions until the Bulgarian Agitation, aided Gladstone's mental and theoretical processes. Distinguishing the stance of the Turkish government from the English government in terms of protecting the rights and properties of the community, further reveals Gladstone's appreciation for the safeguarding the religious freedom of non-Muslims by the British.⁹

In 1855, the Ottoman government was issued £5 million second loan at 102.6 percent with an interest rate of four percent per annum, in order to 'enable his Imperial Majesty the Sultan to prosecute with Vigour the War against Russia in which He is at present engaged in conjunction with their said Majesties His allies; Her Majesty and Her Majesty the Emperor of the French.'¹⁰ The loan was secured on the Egyptian Tribute with the customs of Smyrna and Syria to be remitted to the Bank of England, and the full amount of One Half Year's Interest and Sinking Fund on the whole amount of the said Loan to be raised under the conjoint guarantee of Britain and France.¹¹ From the British point of view, however, the objections to the guarantee raised by the opposition in the Parliament, according to Anderson, were due to 'ancient prejudices, financial, constitutional and diplomatic.'¹² Gladstone was reluctant to admit the loan under the terms of the 1855 guarantee. Gladstone's objections to the loan were not founded on moral grounds, nor did they come from his antagonism towards the Ottoman Empire. His argument 'was confined entirely to the terms, tenure, and construction of the treaty, and the effect of those terms upon the position of the relative parties to it.'¹³

Defeated in the 1874 election by Disraeli, Gladstone resigned as leader of the Liberal party and it was generally assumed that he had retired. Later in his life,

⁹ Gladstone, *The Slavonic provinces of the Ottoman Empire*, p. 16.

¹⁰ BL GP Add MS 44586, ff. 93-5, fol. 93, 'Turkish Loan, A bill to enable her majesty to carry into effect a Convention made between Her Majesty, His Majesty the Emperor of the French, and His Imperial the Majesty of Sultan, 21 July 1855'

¹¹ BL GP Add MS 44586, ff.93-5, fol. 94.

¹² Anderson, 'Great Britain and the Beginnings of Ottoman Public Debt, 1854-55', p. 56.

¹³ Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*, third series, 139 (27 July 1855), cc1463-513.

he recalled 'I was most anxious to make the retirement of the ministry. I had served for more than forty years. My age 65', he wrote with a desire for 'an interval between parliament and the grave.'¹⁴ During his tenure in Downing Street, Disraeli's vision of British imperial and foreign policies, including his attitude to the Eastern Crisis of 1875-78, differed significantly from that of Gladstone's non-interventionist policies for the Empire and approaches to crucial issues in foreign affairs.

Since the Crimean War, Gladstone's thinking about the Ottoman Empire had been consistent factor which reflected his underlying deep concern as to the rights of protection over all non-Muslim subjects. Gladstone's speech, in fact, was deemed to be a 'vindication'¹⁵ of the policy that the Turkish government had failed to actively implement reforms which presents ample evidence of this distrust. He did, however, promoted the religious equivalent between Muslim-Christian subjects all over the Empire and this set of relevant background beliefs helped to justify Gladstone's approach to British policy towards the Porte. In his passion for religious freedom, Gladstone showed a sympathy not only to Christian subjects with biblical faith but also seemingly sincere to the Muslim community. Nonetheless, it became apparent that Gladstone was becoming increasingly irritated with the unresolved Ottoman problems; all the same, he adhered to the principle of preserving her territorial integrity and political independence.

The very depth of Gladstone's indignation for the Turkish administration at this time has contributed to the development of a particular misinterpretation regarding Gladstone's subsequent attitude towards the Turks. For instance, Sir Charles Adderley charged Gladstone of 'turning the Turks bag and baggage out of Europe' in his speech at Hanley.¹⁶ Gladstone himself uttered words of a

¹⁴ Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone*, vol. II, p. 498.

¹⁵ Matthew, *The Gladstone Diaries*, vol. ix., p. 103, '8 February 1876'

¹⁶ BL GP Add MS 44452 fol. 87 'Mr. Gladstone and Sir Charles Adderley', 21 October 1876.

similar effect by saying that he meant to go no further than suggesting a long-lasting solution: ‘Charles Adderley simply fell into a gross blunder. The Turks to be removed from are mentioned in a list of civil and military employés. i.e Government officers. Just before, I speak of the Turkish executive power and of the future arrangements to be made with the ‘Mahometan minorities.’¹⁷ Gladstone’s Bulgarian campaign and the rhetorical framework proceeded with public speeches and national meetings. There is little doubt that the Blackheath speech on 9 September 1876 can be considered as the culmination of his rhetorical intelligence and its repercussions amongst the audience.

It would be fair to state that the Bulgarian Agitation was immediately turned into a sentiment that connected the various strata of the British public in the light of Gladstone’s vision. ‘I have not your responsibilities to the party’ Gladstone wrote to Lord Granville, ‘but I have for the moment more than your responsibilities to the country, in this sense that I feel myself compelled to advise from time to time upon the course of that national movement which I have tried hard to evoke, and assist in evoking.’¹⁸ An anti-Turkish feeling in government policies towards the Porte was substantially high and Gladstone had to endeavour to explain this willingness publicly.

Once the background for an election campaign had been established, it is logical to analyse the features of the Midlothian as to its essentiality for Gladstone’s role during the Eastern Question. Particularly, the importance of the campaign for this research comes from its speciality following a national awakening. For that reason, it is crucial to examine Gladstone’s political stances throughout the campaign. By the same token, this chapter also seeks to find answers to the questions as to what extent did Gladstone refer to his Eastern Question

¹⁷ BL GP Add. MS 44452 fol. 82 ‘The Potteries’ 22 October 1876

¹⁸ Ramm, *The political correspondence of Mr. Gladstone and Lord Granville 1876-1880*, I, ‘Mr. Gladstone to Lord Granville on 7 October 1876’, p. 13.

campaign and how can his policy be defined; ‘Political opportunism’ or ‘public trust in a politician’?

Gladstone’s Midlothian campaigns and the following General Election of 1880 influenced the nature of British party politics as well as the British politicians’ approaches to national elections. Meisel defines the Midlothian Campaigns of 1879 and 1880 as ‘the great events of nineteenth century British politics’ by addressing to Gladstone’s politics at Midlothian as the main evidence that was ‘well-suited to the political conditions of the last two decades of the nineteenth century.’¹⁹ From a different angle, Matthew assesses the Midlothian Campaign ‘as the way towards the secular humanitarianism of twentieth-century Liberalism,’ also by referring to George Malcolm Young’s observation that²⁰: ‘the mind of 1890 would have startled the mind of 1860 by its frank secularism’.²¹

On 24 November 1879, in his diary, Gladstone described the first Midlothian campaign which began with a train journey from Liverpool to Carlisle, Hawick and Galashiels, as ‘a triumphal procession’ and an ‘extraordinary day.’²² Morley was a witness of the campaign which he portrays as follows; ‘The stations where the train stopped were crowded, thousands flocked from neighbouring towns and villages to main centres on the line of route, and even at wayside spots hundreds assembled, merely to catch a glimpse of the express as it dashed through.’²³ Gladstone also recorded that ‘both from the numbers

¹⁹ Joseph S. Meisel, *Public Speech and the Culture of Public Life in the Age of Gladstone*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 243 and 245.

²⁰ See related article by James A. Colaiaco, ‘The Historian as Insider: G. M. Young and Victorian England’, *The History Teacher*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Aug., 1983), pp. 523-539.

²¹ George M. Young, *Portrait of an Age*, (London: Phoenix Press, 1960), p. 166 in Matthew, *Gladstone diaries...*, p. 42.

²² Matthew, *Gladstone Diaries...vol. ix*, p. 461.

²³ Morley, *The Life of William Ewart...*, p. 587.

and the enthusiasm with solitary groan or howl and fireworks, torches at Dalmeny with Lord Rosebery.²⁴

From the beginning of the campaign, the majority of newspapers across the political spectrum showed a great interest in Gladstone's journeys, reminiscent of press reports during the Bulgarian Agitation of 1876. Once again, the newspaper reading public could read diametrically opposed the versions of the same meetings. For instance, the *Daily News* on 25 November reported that Gladstone's presence in Scotland was a sign of satisfaction with which the Liberal party waits for the long-delayed challenge to the electoral struggle²⁵ whereas *the Northern Echo* on the same day by referring to Gladstone's position and the *Liberal Committee in Newcastle upon-Tyne* who judge a constituency solely from its Parliamentary representatives was the last town in the Kingdom which would be expected to send an address congratulation and approval to the leader of the national revolt against the Anglo-Turkish Alliance.²⁶

Unsurprisingly, the content of Gladstone's speeches was a synthesis of Lord Beaconsfield Cabinet's economic, social and foreign policy 'faults' or 'shortcomings' of Whig politicians, particularly the Prime Minister, Disraeli. Meisel defined the Midlothian as 'a platform' in which Gladstone succeeded in bringing a broad range of foreign and domestic policy issues such as Liberal Party leadership, critiques of Disraeli's foreign policy mainly referring back to the Bulgarian atrocities and the religious qualities of the campaign.²⁷ Needless to say, foreign policy was the headline, especially the Eastern Question. Hence, the essential question to be asked is: to what extent did Gladstone refer to the

²⁴ Matthew, *Gladstone Diaries*, p. 461.

²⁵ 'London, Tuesday, 25 November', *The Daily News*, 25 November 1879.

²⁶ 'Mr. Gladstone's position', *The Northern Echo*, 25 November 1879.

²⁷ Joseph S. Meisel, *Public Speech and the Culture of Public Life in the Age of Gladstone*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) p. 244.

Eastern Question and what was it about Gladstone's rhetoric that so influenced the masses in these speeches?

In order to assess the major significance of the speeches related to Tory foreign policies, and especially the Eastern Question and relations with the Ottoman Empire, it would be logical to simply examine the content of his speeches which were also published in Edinburgh in due course.²⁸ In his first Midlothian speech, his references to the Eastern Question were the developments such as the Andrassy Note in 1875 and the Berlin Memorandum of 1876. He directly addressed the Tory Government asking 'whether the facts of the case bear out, or whether they (Tory speakers) do not absolutely confute that assertion' by defining their insensitivity of against the real facts.²⁹ He further added 'was it faction in the Liberal Party to remain silent during all these important acts, and to extend their confidence to the Government in the affairs of the Turkish Empire, even when that Government was acting in contradiction to the whole spirit, I may say, of civilised mankind-certainly in contradiction to the united proposals of the five Great Powers of the continent of Europe?'³⁰ By referring to the humanitarian aspect of the Bulgarian Agitation, he reminded the audience that he was the one who had awakened the national feeling against the acts of the government. He strongly denied the accusations labelling him as a political opportunist on the way to return to politics and justified his acts throughout the Eastern Question.³¹

²⁸ William E. Gladstone, *Midlothian Speeches 1879 with an Introduction by M. R. D. Foot*, (New York: Humanities Press, 1971)

²⁹ Gladstone, *Midlothian Speeches 1879...*, p. 39.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 39.

³¹ 'It is true that it was said with reference to me that any made use of the susceptibilities of the country for the purpose of bringing himself back to office was worse than those who had perpetrated the Bulgarian Massacres.' *Ibid*, p. 40.

While Gladstone's second Midlothian speech of 1879 contained references to the Eastern Question such as 'the Oppressive Government of the Turk', his third Midlothian speech was based on the principles of foreign affairs and recent relations with the Ottomans, for example the Berlin Treaty and Cyprus. In that respect, his speeches at West Calder, Waverley Market and Glasgow covered the 'prospective and fundamental' foreign policies of Great Britain and attitudes to the Ottoman Empire from Gladstone's perspective. For instance, he stated six principles of foreign policy that can also be assessed as 'election promises'.³² Particularly, his references to freedom of the nations were mainly the marks of the Eastern Question as to its humanitarian aspects.

Besides the expenses of humanity and economy, the religious aspect of the Eastern Question can also be considered as a part of that campaign. For example, on 28 December 1879 Gladstone entered these remarks in his diary which can be analysed in terms of his religious approach to the Eastern Question and again during the Midlothian Campaign, 'For the last 3 and half years I have been passing through a political experience which is I believe without example in our Parliamentary history. I profess it to believe it has been an occasion, when the battle to be fought was a battle of justice humanity freedom law, all in their first elements form the very root, and all on a gigantic style. The word spoken was a word for millions, and for millions who themselves cannot speak. If I really believe this then I should regard my having been morally forced into this work as a great and high election of God. And certainly I cannot but believe that He has given me special gifts of strength, on the late occasion especially in Scotland.'³³

³² 'Just legislation and economy, to preserve peace, to maintain the Concert of Europe, to avoid needless engagements, to acknowledge the equal rights of the nations and a love of freedom.' *Ibid*, p. 40.

³³ Matthew, *Gladstone Diaries...*, vol. ix, p. 471.

In the shadow of the clash between ‘the Jingoese’ and ‘the true liberals’, the general election started on 30 March 1880. Gladstone recorded this day with a prayer to gain victory, ‘May God from heaven guide every one of them: and prosper or a base and baffle us for His Glory: lift us up, or trample us down, according as we are promoting or opposing what he knows to be the cause of Truth, Liberty and Justice.’³⁴

Having regard to the above analysis of historiography, it comes clear that the Midlothian campaign was not just a rise in Gladstone’s party politics as well as the official fact that led him to success but also a foundation election in British political history. This said, it also showed the stage of a foreign affair reached within four years period. In other words, the Bulgarian uprising with its humanitarian, religious and social features in the Ottoman Empire echoed to the Disraeli government’s pro-Turkish secular foreign policies. Eventually, by being transformed into a national matter inside Victorian society, the Bulgarian agitation of 1876 was the beginning of the contemporary rituals in British party politics. In this regard, it can be argued that these alterations were engendered in the roles and policies of the Liberal statesman. Most important of all, this wind of change eventually ended with an alteration in Anglo-Ottoman relations.

³⁴ Matthew, *Gladstone Diaries...vol.ix*, p. 496.