



**Chris Harman**

**Thinking it through**

## **Return of the Eastern Question**

**(July 1992)**

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From **Socialist Review**, No.155, July/August 1992, p.7.

Transcribed & marked up by [Einde O'Callaghan](#) for the **Marxists' Internet Archive**.

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There were a lot of things they didn't teach me much about at school. They managed to miss out the French Revolution completely, and treated Chartism as a footnote to the Anti-Corn Law League.

But one thing they did hammer into us, lesson after lesson – the Eastern Question. This, the dominating issue in British foreign policy from about 1820 right to the end of the century, arose from the decay of the old Ottoman Empire, which had once covered all of North Africa, most of the Middle East, Asia Minor, the Balkans, the lands round the Black Sea and the southern Caucasus. It was now falling apart at the seams, its rulers unable to cope with the changes wrought in the world by the rise of capitalism, and threatening to leave a power vacuum extending from south east Europe right into the heart of Asia.

Such a prospect caused enormous fear to the rulers of Britain, even though they had gained more than anyone else

from the rise of capitalism. They ruled over a global empire and feared the damage such instability would cause to their lines of communication. And so the foreign policy of the most advanced capitalist country came to rest on artificially propping up the power of a decaying pre-capitalist empire, even if this helped ensure the continued economic backwardness of large areas of Europe and Asia.

It was a policy which British governments found impossible to implement successfully, since the forces destroying the Ottoman Empire were irresistible. But it was also a policy they found impossible to abandon.

Today we are witnessing what could almost be termed a revival of the Eastern Question. Western governments are once again desperately trying, unsuccessfully, to cope with instability in the same regions as their predecessors of more than a century ago. The places which featured in 19th century diplomatic history – Armenia, Moldavia, Bosnia, the Crimea – are suddenly current history.

This time the cause has been the collapse of Stalinism and its illegitimate offspring Titoism. At the moment of greatest collapse, in the autumn and winter of 1989, there was rejoicing among Western rulers. They saw ‘victory’ in the Cold War as leading to a new world order in which they would have absolute hegemony.

Today they are not so sure of themselves. Economic slump has bred political instability. In an area which stretches from the hinterland of Venice to the Chinese border, old nomenklaturists and new populist politicians alike have seen no way to ward off challenges to their policies from below other than to stoke up national and ethnic hatreds – Romanian speaker against Russian speaker in Moldavia, Armenian speaker against Turkish speaker in Azerbaijan, Serb versus Kosovan and Croat versus Serb in Yugoslavia, Russian versus Ukrainian versus Tatar in the Crimea. All the

animosity which was promoted by the belated development of market capitalism a century ago is now resurrected with the crisis of state capitalism.

Apologists for capitalism put forward an argument which opponents of the system sometimes mistakenly accept. They say that, because capital in the form of money or commodities can move from country to country, capitalists have no need for rival national states – or, at least, do not have any need of them once the system has reached its present multinational stage of development.

According to this view, the more the market dominates the whole globe, the less there will be armed conflicts between rival national capitalisms.

What it forgets is that the wealth of individual capitalists is tied down in machines, buildings and real estate which cannot easily be moved from one place to another, and whose profitability is closely tied to the policies of national governments. Any capitalist can then see the national state power as a very useful lever to increase the ability to win out in competition with other capitalists. This is especially true in periods of economic crisis, when the position of even giant capitals can become precarious – witness the fate of the Maxwell, Reichmann and BCCI empires. The temptation for the smaller capitals in the less prosperous parts of the world system is to prop themselves up with the power of the state.

So it is that the collapse of the state capitalist Eastern bloc has not been followed by a comfortable emergence of peacefully competing market capitalisms, but of petty – and some not so petty – capitalist states dividing up armouries and using diem against one another.

But the pressures for sub-imperialist adventures do not just arise there. Around its fringes are countries whose industrialists, financiers and bureaucrats desperately aspire

to be in the same league as the big Western and Japanese capitals. Very few of them can achieve this through market competition alone. But by using the state they can extend their influence regionally and increase their weight in the world system.

So Turkey and Iran are competing for influence in the southern republics of the former USSR – apparently backing different sides in the fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan – while Greece, seeking to enhance its own influence against Turkey, talks about the need for military preparedness for possible intervention in the Yugoslav civil war. Much further east, the highly successful *chaebols* (giant firms) of South Korea see the road to conquest of the world market as lying not just through a drive for high tech exports, but also through a strategy for hegemonising North Korea and absorbing it into a single state.

The lesson has not been lost on those who run Russia. Eleven months ago, after the collapse of first the bloc and then the empire, all talk of military intervention was taboo; today there are increasing attempts to influence, with covert and not so covert deployment of military force, the confrontations in Moldavia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. There is now talk of a cold war inside the CIS between Russian led and Ukrainian led blocs.

This replacement of one imperialism in the East by a proliferation of petty imperialisms creates enormous problems for the imperialisms of the West.

At the end of the Gulf War the US insisted on its right to be policeman of the world. Today Bush is insisting the US cannot be the policeman who restores 'order' among the warring South Slavs. Germany, which was only too happy to gain influence in Slovenia and Croatia by helping to detach them from Yugoslavia, fears getting involved in Bosnia where, its generals remind it, Hitler lost six divisions.

Yet both the US and the West European powers fear that, if they don't take action, their bitterly opposed client states, Greece and Turkey, and even their old enemy, Iran, might join in the mayhem, causing a conflagration that no one can control. That, for them, is the nightmare scenario.

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