

Katalin Schrek

Great Power Clashes in the Caucasus Region. Examination of the Vixen Conflict (1836) Based on the British Archives

Abstract

The Eastern Question played a decisive role in the development of the Great Powers' attitude. The roots of the set of problems are closely related to the expansive aspirations of Russia. Resulting from the geostrategic position of the empire, the Balkans became a constant target of Russia's foreign political ambitions. The ethnic fragmentation of the region, the aspirations for independence of the peoples living under Ottoman domination and the decentralized character of the Constantinople administration provided excellent opportunities for St Petersburg to realize their aspirations to enforce their interests. The conflicts, related to the Eastern Question, apart from the dissolution of the Balkans' status quo, meant the permanent and realistic threat of the possible restraint of free shipping in the eastern basin of the Mediterranean and Black Sea. It was the increasing threat posed on the straights and the commercial roads to India that motivated the active role of Great Britain in the Eastern Question. The stabilisation of the political circumstances in the region resulted in the periodic and limited cooperation of the two powers competing to acquire influence in the area in the second half of the 1820's.

Nevertheless the relation between Great Britain and Russia altered in the first half of the 1830's. Russia gained a considerable influence in the Near East and the strengthening of her positions gave new dynamism to the Anglo-Russian rivalry. One of the most important manifestations of the ambivalent liaison between the two states was the so-called Vixen Affair of 1836 which can be a prominent example of the above mentioned tendency.

Keywords: Anglo-Russian rivalry, Eastern Question, Black Sea, Circassia, diplomatic affair, seizure of the Vixen

Conflict management forms an integral part of the sovereign foreign policy in all states. The ways of resolving the clashes of views between countries greatly depend on the nature of the circumstances in the concrete case, on whether the possibility of consensus-making is a realistic option or not and on the characteristics of the direct discourse and relationships between the parties involved. The diplomatic way to remedy conflicts is considered as an evident strategy in relation to great power politics, however, using this method does not prove to be self-evident at every turn. Settling disputes in an amicable way or negotiating can present such a difficulty in some cases for the Governments as it is by using armed forces. This applies in particular, if in the politics of a given state – in this case Great Britain – the stand of the public opinion – quasi as a fourth factor – increasingly prevails next to the principles and ideas declared by the Monarch, the Cabinet or the Parliament. An exemplary case of the factors outlined above is

the Vixen conflict of 1836, which was the diplomatic level manifestation of decades of conflicts between London and St Petersburg.

Traditional diplomatic history works deal tangentially with the development of the relationship between Great Britain and Russia in the first half of the 19th century, while studies in connection with the history of Anglo-Russian relations discuss this topic in greater detail.¹ The common point in all cases is the rivalry regarding both the European Affairs and the Eastern Question which was associated basically with the increasing continental influence of the St Petersburg Cabinet on the one hand, and with the will of controlling this process from the British side on the other hand. This tendency was still typical in the 1830's, which resulted in an atmosphere of mutual distrust between the British and the Russian Governments in the second half of the decade.

All of this was based on the differences observed between the methods of crisis management which were seen already during the Greek War of Independence and in parallel during the Russian-Turkish War of 1828–29, but then markedly manifested during the first Egyptian Crisis (1833). Due to Russia's military support in the Sublime Porte, and later the Treaty of Unkiar Skelessi signed on 8th July, Russia wielded major influence in the region.² Under the agreement between St Petersburg and Constantinople „[...] the two High Contracted Parties are bound to afford to each other mutually substantial aid, and the most efficacious assistance for the safety of their respecting dominions. Nevertheless, His Majesty the Emperor of All the Russias, wishing to spare the Sublime Ottoman Porte the expense and inconvenience which might be occasioned to it by affording substantial aid [...] in place of the aid which it is bound to furnish in case of need, according to the principle of reciprocity of the Patent Treaty, shall confine its action in favour of the Imperial Court of Russia to closing the Strait of the Dardanelles, that is to say, to not allowing any Foreign Vessels of War to enter therein under any pretext whatsoever.”³ In practice, this meant that if any kind of

¹ A few studies without being exhaustive: CRAWLEY, C. W.: *Anglo-Russian Relations 1815–1840*. Cambridge Historical Journal, Vol. 3., N° 1., 1929. 47–73. RODKEY, F. S.: *Conversations on Anglo-Russian Relations in 1838*. The English Historical Review, Vol. 50, N° 197 (Jan., 1935), 120–123. LOBANOV-ROSTOVSKY, A.: *Anglo-Russian Relations Through the Centuries*. Russian Review, Vol. 7, N° 2 (Spring, 1948), 41–52. MARRIOTT, J. A. R.: *Anglo-Russian Relations 1689–1943*, Methuen and Co. Ltd., London, 1944. Id: *The Eastern Question. A Historical Study in European Diplomacy*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1917. SCHROEDER, P.: *Transformation of European Politics 1763–1848*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994. TEMPERLEY, H.: *British Secret Diplomacy From Canning to Grey*. Cambridge Historical Journal, Vol. 6, N° 1., 1938. 1–32.

² BODNÁR E.: *Orosz-osztrák együttműködés és vetélkedés a keleti kérdésben a 18. században és a 19. század első felében*. IN: (Ed.) Id.: *A keleti kérdés és a Balkán az orosz külpolitikában a 19. század első felében*, Hungarovox Kiadó, Budapest, 2008. 71. SCHROEDER: 728–730.

³ The Treaty of Unkiar Skelessi, July 8, 1833. IN: *Peace Handbooks*. Vol. III. *The Balkan States*. I. (Arrange) Historical Session of Foreign Office, H. M. Stationery Office, London, 1920. 72. Regarding the Treaty see also: INGLE, H. N.: *Nesselrode and the Russian Rapprochement with Britain, 1836–1844*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1976. 33. ДЕБИДУР, А.: *Дипломатическая история Европы от Венского конгресса до Берлинского конгресса, 1814–1878*. Т. I., Государственное Издательство Иностранной Литературы, Москва, 1947. 344. PURYEAR, V.: *England, Russia and the*

attack had been carried out against the Ottoman Empire, the chance for Russia to use the straits opened, otherwise the Porte blocked the straits from the fleets of foreign powers.⁴ This action undoubtedly resulted in the strengthened position of St Petersburg giving a fresh impetus to the rivalry of the two leading powers, England and Russia. But the great power rivalry emerged in the international arena had escalated to new areas. In addition to the classic scenes of Europe and the eastern basin of the Mediterranean Sea, the Middle East and Asian regions gradually started to become the centre of the conflicts of interest of the two states' foreign policy.⁵ The Vixen Conflict linked to this course and was also related to the Russian expansion in the Circassian area.

The Government of St Petersburg made serious efforts from the 1820's onwards in order to strengthen its political influence over the Western Caucasus.⁶ The legal framework for these ambitions later was provided by the Treaty of Adrianople of 1829, which allowed Russia to extend its right of control over the region.⁷ This at the same time marked the beginning of the escalation of armed conflicts with the local tribes. However, Russian military action launched to conquer Circassia was not a novel thing. Since the end of the 18th century the objectives of the St Petersburg Government included the annexation plan of the Western Caucasus, which resulted in a series of larger and smaller wars /conflicts over the decades.⁸ More active action from the Russian side, however, only took place in the early 1830's, a part of which the Cabinet of St Petersburg introduced a blockade from 1831 on the coasts stretching from Gelendzhik to Sevastopol in order to isolate local resisters.⁹ The sequestration of the Cuban coasts proved to be a long-term solution thus it was left in place for a several more years. Still, the status of Western Caucasus regions was not clear regardless of the validity of the above mentioned treaty.

Straits Question, University of California Press, Berkely, 1931. 28–29.

⁴ *Cambridge History of British Foreign Policy, 1783–1919*. Vol. II. (Ed.) WARD, A. W. – GOOCH, G. P. University Press, Cambridge, 1923. 165–166. SCHROEDER: 730. ORMOS M. – MAJOROS I.: *Európa a nemzetközi küzdőtérén*, Osiris Kiadó, Budapest, 2003. 71–72. FLORESCU, R. R.: *The Struggle Against Russia in the Roman Principalities. A Problem in Anglo-Turkish Diplomacy, 1821–1854*, The Center for Romanian Studies, Iași, 1997. 276–277.

⁵ LOBANOV-ROSTOVSKY: 46.

⁶ The Russian control over the Caucasus region is dated back to 1802. Concerning this see: MARRIOTT, 1944: 105. However, more intensive intervention took place only from the campaign of 1816 led by General A. P. Yermolov. See: SETON-WATSON, H.: *The Russian Empire 1801–1917*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1967. 183.

⁷ BODNÁR E.: *Oroszország keleti törekvései, 1796-1856*. IN: BODNÁR E. – DEMETER G. (ed.): *A Balkán és a keleti kérdés a nagyhatalmi politikában*. Hungarovox Kiadó, Budapest, 2005. 64-65. *Мирный договор между Россией и Османской империей*. Адрианополь, 2(14) сентября 1829 г. В: ОРЛИК, О. В.: *Россия в международных отношениях 1815–1829. От Венского конгресса до Адрианопольского мира*, Наука, Москва, 1998. 252–259.

⁸ The detailed history of the campaigns is presented in BADDELEY, J. F.: *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus*, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1908.

⁹ INGLE: 62. PURYEAR, V. J.: *International Economics and Diplomacy in the Near East. A Study of British Commercial Policy in the Levant 1834–1853*, Archon Books, [Hamden], 1969. [1935]. 50.

As it was already mentioned, St Petersburg derived its right to control over the territory from the Russian-Turkish agreement signed in September 14, 1829, which recorded Russia's territorial gain.¹⁰ Although Great Britain did not make an official stand on the matter, the Foreign Office collected information constantly on the events that took place in the Western Caucasus. The Foreign Secretary relied in this issue mainly on the reports of Lord Ponsonby, British ambassador to Constantinople and James Yeames, British consul in Odessa.¹¹

The Russian influence prevailing in the Western Caucasus caused growing British anxiety in the second half of the 1830's, since by this time even the possibility of annexation became a realistic alternative. Lord Ponsonby's reports, dated between 1834 and 1836, constantly referred to the unsolved Question of Circassia and the dangers of St Petersburg's expansive behaviour. In the report sent to Palmerston on September 16, 1834, the ambassador to Constantinople stated his detailed point of view about the current situation in Circassia. Prior to Ponsonby's individual assessment, he provided information to David Urquhart about his expeditionary activities planned in the given area.¹² He outlined his concept in this context. Ponsonby believed that by taking the east coasts of the Black Sea under control, the Government of St Petersburg wanted to enrich its territory with an area where about six million inhabitants lived, and he considered this method as a step contrary to the European equilibrium policy.¹³ In another report, the ambassador stressed the threat of the European system of balance. Ponsonby worded as follows: „*It is evident to all who know any thing of Eastern affairs that the conquest of the Caucasus' tribes and the possession of their country will give more power to Russia, than she has gained by the overthrow of Poland, and that the power so gained will operate formidably to the detriment of English interests both political and commercial.*”¹⁴ In addition, he emphasized for the head of the Foreign Office that „*[...] if Circassia be subdued by Russia, the task of protecting the independence of Turkey and Persia, will be rendered tenfold more difficult.*”¹⁵

After these preliminaries the so called Vixen Conflict had emerged. The background to this case was the detention of the British merchant vessel of the same name by Russian authorities. The schooner was first spotted on 24th November, 1836 at the coasts of Circassia subjected to blockade.¹⁶ Soon afterward, a ship with Russian ensign – under the leadership of Captain N. P. Vulf – was instructed to follow the Vixen. The

¹⁰ ФАДЕЕВ А. В.: *Россия и Восточный кризис 20-х годов XIX века.*, Издательство Академии Наук СССР Москва, 1958. 343. MILLER, W.: *The Ottoman Empire, 1801–1913*, University Press, Cambridge, 1913. 130.

¹¹ FO 97/344. Foreign Office and Predecessors. Political and Other Departments. Supplements to General Correspondence before 1906. Russia. *Trade on East Coast of Circassia*. Vol. 1.

¹² Ponsonby to Lord Palmerston. Therapia, September 16th, 1834. FO 97/344. N° 147.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ponsonby to Palmerston. Therapia, October 11th, 1834. FO 97/344. N° 160.

¹⁵ Ponsonby to Palmerston, Therapia, January 7, 1836. FO 97/344. N° 5.

¹⁶ Journal de St. Pétersbourg, 31 Décembre/ 12 Janvier, 1836. TNA/PRO/FO/352/61/3. Papers Relating to the Seizure and Confiscation of the Vixen by the Russian Government. N° 14.

seizure of the Vixen took place two days later in the Bay of Sudzuk-Kale.¹⁷ The seized ship was owned by the Bell Company trading and shipping company. In accordance with the procedures of the Russian authorities the Vixen was transported first to Gelendzhik, and later to Sevastopol.¹⁸ The cargo of the merchant vessel was confiscated, while the British crew was placed in Odessa.¹⁹

James Yeames, British consul in Odessa was informed about the events on 12th December directly by James Bell, who not only was one of the owners of the vessel in question, but also the direct stakeholder of the events.²⁰ The British consul in Odessa forwarded the information described by Bell to Lord Ponsonby, British ambassador to Constantinople first²¹, and then a few days later to Lord Durham, British ambassador to St Petersburg.²² In the second phase of that process, the Foreign Office received reports from the above mentioned diplomatic representatives, on the basis of which Lord Palmerston evaluated the situation evolved. From the aforesaid reports the most dominant ones were written by the British ambassador to St Petersburg, since Lord Durham held direct intercourse with K. R. Nesselrode, head of the Russian Foreign Ministry. The two held their first consultation on the matter on 7th January, 1837. Durham put the substantive elements of the discussion very succinctly: „*On the 7th (January) instant, Count Nesselrode called on me for the purpose of making me acquainted with the circumstances attending the seizure and confiscation of the ship Vixen, on the coast of Circassia.*”²³ The British ambassador to St Petersburg emphasized in his letter to the Foreign Secretary that in his view the case did not require serious actions on behalf of the British Cabinet: „*As the official report from the Admiral commanding on that station, and the declaration of the Russian Government [...] I deem it unnecessary to trouble your Lordship with a repetition in writing [...]*”²⁴ The position of the Cabinet of St Petersburg on the matter – which was published in the St Petersburg Journal issued on 31st December 1836/12th January 1837 – was fully attached to this letter. The communication made it clear that the vessel had intended to trade with local tribes of Circassia. The vessel transported salt, a product that was put on the blacklist according to the Russian custom and trade regulations.

The Russian Government wished to clear the situation, therefore defined accurately the status of the area in question and the content of the provisions in force since 1831. In addition, as an important action the Government declared

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ INGLE: 64.

¹⁹ Ibid. 64–65.

²⁰ Mr. James Bell to Mr Consul General Yeames. Theodosia, December 12, 1836. TNA/PRO/FO/352/61/3. Enclosure 2 in N^o 11.

²¹ Mr. Consul General Yeames to Lord Ponsonby. Odessa, December 20, 1836. TNA/PRO/FO/352/61/3. N^o Enclosure 1 in N^o 11.

²² Mr. Consul General Yeames to the Earl of Durham. Odessa, December 22, 1836. TNA/PRO/FO/352/61/3. N^o 13.

²³ The Earl of Durham to Viscount Palmerston. St. Petersburg, January 12, 1837. TNA/PRO/FO/352/61/3. N^o 14.

²⁴ Ibid.

anew – and confirmed at the same time – all the information related to the health and custom regulations which were described in the circular letters sent out by M. Butenev in October, 1831, and on 13th September, 1836 to the representatives of foreign powers in Constantinople.

Consequently, Durham was basically restrained in terms of his behaviour and the resolution of the case. Although he faithfully represented the official position of the British Government during the consultations with Nesselrode in January 1837, under which the Cabinet in London demanded compensation for the unlawful confiscation of the cargo of the *Vixen*²⁵, but in fact, he tried to convince Palmerston to reduce British demands. Nesselrode stood for a similar point of view as well. In his opinion, the Russian Government had acted in a correct manner in case of the *Vixen* Affair. In his formal justification sent to the British ambassador to St Petersburg he wrote as follows: „*That vessel has been confiscated, because, having on board a cargo of prohibited goods, it entered a port belonging to Russia in virtue of the Treaty of Adrianople [...] whereas the Russian regulations [...] prohibit foreign vessels from entering that port, where there is neither a custom-house nor a quarantine establishment; and, on the other hand, open to them at a short distance from thence the port of Anapa, where the Vixen would have been freely admitted if she had been engaged in an ordinary and legal commercial enterprize.*”²⁶ Since Russians assessed the circumstances of the case unequivocal, the captain of the *Vixen* and George Bell were declared smugglers, thus formal procedures were carried out accordingly.²⁷ Nevertheless, it must be noted that the Government of St Petersburg sought to comply with the principle of fairness while handling the situation. A proof of this is that the accused were pardoned by Nicholas I and he let them to leave for Constantinople, the costs of which were stood by the Emperor himself.²⁸

In short it can be said that the form of crisis management was moderate in St Petersburg, while in London the Cabinet showed a kind of dual behaviour in this regard. The British Government declared that the process used by the Russian authorities was unlawful, but it did not take any serious diplomatic action for the redress of grievances. To prove the illegal nature of the process Lord Palmerston called the existence of the blockade into question. The Foreign Secretary explained his arguments in his letter dated on 3 February sent to Lord Greville: „*The fact is, that Russia has never declared a blockade, but has established custom regulations confining commerce to one or two points where custom-houses are established, and pretends that ships trading to other points on the coast are seizable as smugglers. Now to entitle her to make such regulations, she ought to possess the coast de jure and de facto. Her right de jure depends upon the Treaty of Adrianople, which conveys to her, not Circassia, but the sea coast from the Cuban*

²⁵ INGLE: 66-67.

²⁶ Count Nesselrode to the Earl of Durham. St. Petersburg, April 27/ May 9, 1837. TNA/PRO/FO/352/61/3. N° 28.

²⁷ DALY, C. K.: *Russian Seapower and the Eastern Question*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, 1991. 123.

²⁸ Ibid. 124.

to St. *Nicolas*.²⁹ On this basis, the disputed points were the question of the existence of the blockade on the one hand, and the legal nature of Russia's prevailing influence over the Western Caucasus on the other hand.

In respect of the former question, conflicting information is available. As already mentioned, Russia sequestered the entire length of the Cuban coast in 1831. The blockade came into force after the release of the Emperor's ukase on the matter, which was sent by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to not just Constantinople, but to the ambassadors of other European Great Powers – so presumably to the British ambassador as well – in September of the same year.³⁰ However, the Cabinet in London consistently held in connection with the Vixen Case that „*Her Majesty's Government*” had no knowledge of the blockade. This picture is somewhat overshadowed by an exchange of letters between the Foreign Office and the Bell Company taking place in the spring and summer of 1836.

The British shipping company wanted to obtain information in connection with the conditions of the commercial activity in the Caucasus region. As they described in the letter sent on 25th May, 1836, the possibility had opened to the company to build closer economic ties with Wallachia. After preliminary discussions with Ruler Alexandru II (1834-1842), the Bell Company received concession for the extraction of local salt mines and merchandise of goods. The opportunity was thus given, but the start-up of the promising venture required precise knowledge about the political and economic status of the region, specifically the eastern basin of the Black Sea. According to the owners' original plan, the salt load was going to sell on the eastern coast of the Black Sea, which in part would include the areas affected by the perceived or real blockade. In addition to the proximity of the target area, the market receptivity of the population in the region gave reality to the idea. Based on these assumptions, George Bell requested information on the current status of the area in question in his letter addressed to Lord Palmerston: „*We therefore request the favour of your Lordship, to inform us whether there be any restrictions on the trade with that line of coast which are recognised by His Majesty's Government [...]*.”³¹

The Foreign Office stressed in its official reply that „*[...] His Majesty's Government does not undertake to guide individuals in determining whether they shall enter into, or decline, commercial speculations in foreign countries. It is for Individuals to judge for themselves upon such matters [...]*.”³² From the Vixen Case's point of view it may seem indicative that the official response did not provide clear information concerning the status of the Cuban coasts. Interestingly, in the debate erupted in the Parliament later in connection with the Affair of the

²⁹ Palmerston to Greville, 3 February, 1837,. In: *The Life of Henry John Temple Viscount Palmerston with Selections from his Diaries and Correspondence*. Vol. II. (Ed.) BULWER, H. L., New Burlington Street, London, 1871. 248-249.

³⁰ DALY: 124.

³¹ Messrs. George Bell and Co. to Viscount Palmerston, Mitre Chambers, Fenchurch Street, May 25, 1836. TNA/PRO/FO/352/61/3. N° 1.

³² The Honourable W. Fox Strangways to Messrs. George Bell. and Co., Foreign Office, May 30, 1836. TNA/PRO/FO/352/61/3. N° 2.

Vixen, the accusations against the Cabinet in London – saying that the Government urged the attempt to break up the blockade in the Caucasus – were rejected by Palmerston by referring to the same documents.

The two parties made two further exchange of letters at the end of May and in early June in 1836. As for the content of the documents, essential new elements do not appear, however, it is important to emphasize that more and more specific wording occurred in the letters of the owners of the Bell Company. The question raised by the enterprise concerned – initially covertly, later in a more open form – the existence of the Russian blockade imposed on a specific section of the Circassian coasts. George Bell's letter addressed to Admiral Esmante, which was later forwarded to Palmerston by Lord Durham, can be an interesting supplement to all this, as it referred to the content of the preliminary correspondence between the Foreign Office and the executives of the Bell Company. George Bell pointed out that the British Government identified the London Gazette as a basic orientation. But the newspaper did not published any articles about the restrictions imposed by the Russians along the coasts of the Caucasus, so the owners of the Vixen set sailing without knowing anything about the prohibition.³³

To the interpretation or a more thorough understanding of the problems relating the blockade and the circular letter of 1831, the presentation of the British and the Russian Governments' rhetoric and using of terminology is inevitable, and may serve as a guidance to the hardships in the exchange of letters mentioned above. Namely the sequestration of the Circassian coasts had not been accepted neither in London nor in St Petersburg. Russia assessed the measures applied on the affected areas as a severity of certain points of the custom and trade regulations executed in accordance with the existing law. And about all these changes Russia provided a full range of information through the Russian ambassador to Constantinople. Butenev sent out his report dated on 13 September, 1836, to the local delegates of both the Porte and the European Great Powers: „*In the course of the year 1831, and specifically by the communication of the 30 September/12 October of that year, I had the honour, by order of my Court, to acquaint the Representatives of Foreign Powers at Constantinople with the measures which my Government had thenceforth established, with respect to foreign vessels frequenting the eastern coast of the Black Sea, belonging to Russia, with the twofold view of preserving those coasts from the introduction of the plague, and of preventing smuggling on the same coast.*”³⁴ Then added: „*Some cases having since occurred, in which the regulations on this matter have been disregarded, the Imperial Government now finds itself called upon to provide with greater vigilance for the strict observance of the existing regulations, and has commanded me to repeat the communications formerly made on this matter.*”³⁵ Based on the quotation above, the Russians referred

³³ Messrs. Bell and Childs to Admiral Esmante, Gelednjik, December 2, 1836. TNA/PRO/FO/352/61/3. Enclosure 2 in N° 15.

³⁴ M. de Bouténeff to Lord Ponsonby, Buyukdéré, le 1/13 Septembre, 1836. TNA/PRO/FO/977/344. Enclosure in N° 7.

³⁵ Ibid.

very clearly to the existence of the memorandum dated five years earlier and the continuous validity of the provisions included. Nesselrode insisted coherently on these elements all along the negotiations about the Vixen. The correctness of the above mentioned justification and the Russian Foreign Minister's behaviour is supported by John Henry Mandeville's report dated on 26th October, 1831, addressed to Palmerston, which confirmed the restrictions imposed, and also included Butenev's memorandum, in which the Russian ambassador – in response to the instructions of the St Petersburg Cabinet – provided information about regulations affect foreign ships and their commercial activities.³⁶ The document thus reached the British Government, in fact it was included in the document collection containing all the materials and exchange of letters related to the Case of the Vixen, which was published in 1837 in order to inform representatives of the House of Commons and House of Lords.³⁷

The factors lying behind the British Cabinet's point of view must be considered in the light of all this. In view of the correspondence between the Bell Company and the Foreign Office, as well as the content of the Russian memorandum, inconsistencies to some extent from London's side can be observed. It is difficult to deny the fact that the British Cabinet – during the Governments led by Charles Grey (1830–1834) and later by Lord Melbourne (1835–1841) – was aware of St Petersburg's measures and the nature and means of Russian policy applied in Circassia. Still, interestingly enough, the British representatives of foreign affairs were not fully aware of the developments.³⁸ The double-faced rhetoric of the British political circles can be presented best by the permanent use of the term 'blockade' to describe a phenomenon / status which – according to its main attributes – can be partly equivalent to the notion, but by no means identical with it in theoretical and legal terms. Since Russia did not declared the blockade of the eastern coast of the Black Sea in 1831, therefore this term was not used on the level of diplomacy. By contrast, in British documents the word stands regularly in itself, or in many cases as a synonym for the more stringent legal regulations. This kind of inconsistency or falsehood resulted that the leadership in London apparently advocated against the illegality of a blockade, which never officially existed from the Russian perspective.

For Great Britain, the biggest problem was actually that they considered the restrictions imposed by St Petersburg as measures affecting free trade which essentially violated the British economic interests.³⁹ This view was formulated

³⁶ Mr. Mandeville to Viscount Palmerston, Therapia, October 31, 1831. TNA/PRO/FO/352/61/3. Further Papers (B) Relating to the Seizure and Confiscation of the Vixen by the Russian Government. Ponsonby later also referred to the Russian memorandum sent to Mandeville. Relating to this see: Ponsonby to Palmerston, September 21, 1836. TNA/PRO/FO/977/344. N^o 160.

³⁷ TNA/PRO/FO/352/61/3. Further Papers (B) Relating to the Seizure and Confiscation of the Vixen by the Russian Government.

³⁸ Lord Ponsonby to Viscount Palmerston, Therapia October 28, 1836. TNA/PRO/FO/352/61/3. N^o 8. Mr. Consul General James Yeames to Lord Ponsonby, Odessa, December 20, 1836. TNA/PRO/FO/352/61/3. Enclosure 1 in N^o 11.

³⁹ It is worth mentioning that the quarantine decree concerning a certain section of the Danube delta entered into force also in 1836, which was again considered by Great Britain as a hinder of free economic activity. See: ARDELEANU, C.: *Russian-British Rivalry Regarding Danube Navigation and the*

most clearly by Lord Durham in connection with an earlier incident: „*With respect to the question, how far Russia has a right to restrain the commerce of other countries [...] I have to observe that by the Law of Nations, no state has a right to restrict the commerce of other nations with a country over which the right of sovereignty de jure is claimed, but where no jurisdiction is exercised.*”⁴⁰ But he also recognized that „*This rule, however, may be subject of modification if there be a partial occupation, in which case [...] a right to seizure vessels contravening municipal regulations might be maintained.*”⁴¹

The impact of the public opinion and its influence on the Vixen Case can be approached from several aspects. First, in terms of representation of the leading media outlets, which may indicate the general method of presentation of events. On the other hand, in perspective of the publicist activity of a particular person, David Urquhart in this case. With regard to the diplomatic affair the first not official reaction on the British side was an article in *The Morning Chronicle* published on 20th December, 1836, to which the publication in the *St Petersburg Journal* referred as well. The two periodicals – not surprisingly – represented the very different interpretation of the given events, which showed significant differences in both content and stylistic point of view. In the English paper’s opinion the aim of the Vixen was „*[...] to raise the illegal and piratical blockade established by Russia on the coast of Circassia [...]*.”⁴² The *Times* and other British papers held a similar point of view reporting undoubtedly that a significant portion of the cargo of the schooner in question was made out of guns and gunpowder.⁴³

St Petersburg’s restrained politics in this case can be traced at this point as well. The Russian Cabinet always avoided to deal with the real purpose of the Vixen and in respect of the conflict they put the emphasis only on the problem of violation of the trade regulations. It had two main reasons: on the one hand Nesselrode tried to smooth the tension established between Great Britain and Russia, and on the other hand he evidently did not want to raise the events took place in the Caucasus into the international political arena.⁴⁴

As of the Vixen case, mentioning the role of David Urquhart is of great importance as well. He was a diplomat born in Scotland, who served in the Ottoman Empire in the 1830s, and from 1835 to 1837 he served as the first secretary of Lord Ponsonby, British ambassador to Constantinople. One of the most important fundamentals of David Urquhart’s foreign policy mind-set was his insistence to the anti-Russian view. Consequently, he opposed the policy

Origins of the Crimean War (1846–1853). *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 2010, Vol. 19., N° 2., 166.

⁴⁰ Lord Durham Draft. February 29, 1836. TNA/PRO/FO/97/344. N° 13.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *The Morning Chronicle*, 20 December, 1836.

⁴³ *Ibid.* *The Times*, 22 December, 1836.; *Morning Post*, 21 December, 1836.; *London Standard*, 20 December 1836. This allegation was later confuted in a statement by the owners of the Vixen: *Morning Post*, 7 February 1837.

⁴⁴ BOLSOVER, G. H.: *Urquhart and the Eastern Question*. *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 8, N° 4 (Dec., 1936), 465.

represented by Palmerston. He criticized the Government for failing to take prompt and effective steps following the arrest of the Vixen and repeatedly hinted that Palmerston's conduct is inconsistent with Great Britain's interests.⁴⁵ His personal involvement in the case can partly account for his strong opinion-forming manner. Through his relationships, Urquhart held continuous intercourse with the Circassian insurgents for whom he supposedly promised future support from the British Government. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the Bell Company launched its vessel towards the eastern coasts of the Caucasus probably motivated by Urquhart's – and partly Ponsonby's – encouragement.⁴⁶ This assumption can be supported by one of George Bell's letter who – without indicating the name – referred to David Urquhart, who wrote about his visits in Circassia in the reports sent from Constantinople. In his detailed description about his experience there, Urquhart emphasized that he had not perceived Russian control on that particular parts of the coasts of the Black Sea.⁴⁷

Both the Cabinet in London as well as the Cabinet in St Petersburg⁴⁸ had information on Urquhart's earlier activities. As regards the former, we should refer to the complications occurred around the appearance of the series called Portfolio.⁴⁹ The multi-volume publication, published in 1835–1836, communicated relevant documents about the British-Russian diplomatic relations. Thematically it was basically characterized by anti-Russian orientation. Presumably, Urquhart was the editor of the publication. Because of the illegally leaked material, Palmerston indicated his serious concerns regarding the employment of Urquhart. However, the conditions of his deposal⁵⁰ were created by the Vixen conflict, the submitting of which to the Parliament was suggested by Urquhart himself.⁵¹

Because of the vigorous press coverage of the Anglo-Russian disagreement, the case was added to the agenda of the House of Commons and discussed during the sitting held on 17th March, 1837.⁵² Although it is worth mentioning that speeches had already been made on the matter a few weeks earlier.⁵³ Members of

⁴⁵ INGLE: 69.

⁴⁶ BOLSOVER: 463-464. FLORESCU: 280.

⁴⁷ Mr. George Bell to John Backhouse, Esq., Mitre Chambers, Fenchurch Street, February 20, 1837. TNA/PRO/FO/352/61/3. N^o 19.

⁴⁸ Депеша русского посла в Вене Татищева вице-канцлеру Нессельроде, 2 мая (19 апреля) 1837 г. Красный архив, № 5 (102). 1940. (http://www.vostlit.info/Texts/Dokumenty/Kavkaz/XIX/1820-1840/Incident_Viksen/text2.htm, downloaded: 3 June, 2014.)

⁴⁹ WEBSTER, Ch.: *Urquhart, Ponsonby and Palmerston*. The English Historical Review, Vol. 62, N^o 244 (Jul., 1947), 332-340.

⁵⁰ Balliol College Archives and Manuscripts Collection. David Urquhart Papers. I C8. Letters Relating to David Urquhart Recall From Constantinople (1837)..; ROBINSON, G.: *David Urquhart. Some Chapters in the Life of a Victorian Knight-Errant of Justice and Liberty*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1920. 58. KING, CH.: *Imaging Circassia. David Urquhart and the Making of North Caucasus Nationalism*. The Russian Review, 66 (April, 2007), 247.

⁵¹ PURYEAR (1969): 69.

⁵² The Vixen – Treaty of Adrianople. House of Commons Debates, 17 March 1837. Hansard, Series III. Vol. 37. cc. 621-656.

⁵³ The Case of the Vixen. House of Commons Debates, 6 February 1837. Hansard, Series III.

Parliament asked for a detailed report from Palmerston on the foreign policy approach of the Cabinet in London and they questioned the nature of the British Government's involvement in the case.⁵⁴ Palmerston could block successfully the allegations against the Cabinet by referring to the correspondence with the Bell Company, but the Foreign Secretary had to face the fact that the Case of the Vixen expanded beyond the control of the Foreign Office. Therefore, he sought to end the clashes with St Petersburg as soon as possible. Palmerston stated in his letter sent to Lord Durham on 19th April, 1837, that the British Government had to take urgent steps against all the measures – imposed by Russia – restricting trading activities on the eastern coasts of the Black Sea, but at the same time London would show willingness to formally acknowledge the legal right of St Petersburg to possess the Bay of Sudzhuk-Kale.⁵⁵

At the time of the situation generated by the British diplomacy, Nesselrode defined the following instructions in his letter addressed to Butenev, Russian ambassador to Constantinople: „*For the sake of Russia's dignity and security, two main conditions are required (to be realized). 1. Not letting England to dispute the legality of the confiscation of the Vixen. 2. Holding our decision about the confiscation of the Vixen in effect, so that the rigor of this act would deter other vessels from Great Britain – similar to the one of the Bell Company – from (such) attempts which led to the failure of the Vixen.*”⁵⁶ The then accepted directive remained the base of the Russian concept till the very end to the conflict.

After negotiations with Palmerston, Lord Durham asked the Russian Foreign Minister to refer about the Case of the Vixen to the Government in St Petersburg so that it could give a formal explanation regarding the procedure applied against the schooner.⁵⁷ With this gesture, the British Foreign Secretary had already indicated to Nesselrode that he was striving to find a compromise. In his reply on 9th May, 1837, Nesselrode confirmed again that the Russian Government considered the Vixen Affair as a simple violation of custom rules and not as an attempt to intervene in the Russian-Circassian conflict.⁵⁸ A few weeks later, signs of a thaw in the British Cabinet actually showed up. Nesselrode reported the

Vol. 36. cc. 133–134.

⁵⁴ The Vixen – Treaty of Adrianople. Hous of Commons Debates, 17 March 1837. Hansard, Series III. Vol. 37. cc. 621-656.

⁵⁵ BOLSOVER: 464-465.

⁵⁶ Деша вице-канцлера Нессельроде русскому послу в Константинополе Бутеневу, 11 апреля (30 марта) 1837 г. Текст воспроизведен по изданию: Англо-русский инцидент со шхунной „Виксен” (1836–1837 гг.). Красный архив, № 5 (102). 1940. (http://www.vostlit.info/Texts/Dokumenty/Kavkaz/XIX/1820-1840/Incident_Viksen/text2.htm, downloaded: 3 June, 2014).

⁵⁷ The Earl of Durham to Count Nesselrode, St. Petersburg, May 6, 1837. TNA/PRO/FO/352/61/3. Enclosure 1 in N^o 28.

⁵⁸ Count Nesselrode to the Earl of Durham, St. Petersburg, May 9, 1837. TNA/PRO/FO/352/61/3. Enclosure 2 in N^o 28. Нота вице-канцлера Нессельроде английскому послу в Петербурге Дюэму, 9 мая (24 апреля) 1837 г. Текст воспроизведен по изданию: Англо-русский инцидент со шхунной „Виксен” (1836–1837 гг.). Красный архив, № 5 (102). 1940. (http://www.vostlit.info/Texts/Dokumenty/Kavkaz/XIX/1820-1840/Incident_Viksen/text2.htm, downloaded: 3 June, 2014).

following developments in his report sent to inform Pozzo di Borgo, Russian ambassador to London: „*The British ambassador has just pleased to inform me that he had received a report from the Head of the Foreign Secretary. A copy of this report is attached. Reading this document, [...] His Majesty's Government [...] on the score of what is listed in my memorandum of 27th April (9th May) does not have sufficient motive to cast doubt on Russia's right to seize and confiscate the Vixen in the Bay of Sudjuk Kale (as it happened) and does not intend to lay any further claim pertaining to the vessel seized [...].*”⁵⁹

The final chord of the diplomatic disagreement was Palmerston's statement saying that „*His Majesty's Government in the first place takes into account that Sudjuk Kale, which was recognized by Russia in the Convention of 1783⁶⁰ as a Turkish possession, is now [...] belongs to Russia on the basis of the Treaty of Adrianople; furthermore it (also) takes into account that this port is under Russian [...] occupation, as His Excellency (Lord Durham) stated it in his report dated on 13th May, (and) sees no reason to question Russia's right to seize and confiscate the Vixen in the Bay of Sudjuk Kale [...]. His Majesty's Government does not intend to lay any further claim against Russia pertaining to the vessel seized.*”⁶¹ Mutual concessions affected reassuringly the leaders of the two states, allowing them to solve the Case of the Vixen through diplomatic channels.

Regarding the conflict took place in 1836–1837, the differences and the same features of the ways Great Britain and Russia handled the crisis can be observed, which were tough greatly influenced by the special position of the Caucasus region involved in the case. The Government of London initially showed a decided manner, but later it was paradoxically related with a restrained foreign policy activity. The same method can be observed in the case of St Petersburg with the marked difference that the Russian negotiators represented a kind of moderate stance even during the early consultations. Palmerston's specific foreign policy in the Case of the Vixen eventually proved successful in terms of the British interests, as it provided the opportunity for the amicable settlement of the case, while at the same time England could preserve its prestige. Overall, it can be said that the peaceful conclusion of the Vixen Affair was the result of the coordination of mutual compromises of the British and Russian positions.

⁵⁹ Из депеши вице-канцлера Нессельроде русскому послу в Лондоне Поццо-ди-Борго, 3 июня (22 мая) 1837 г. IN.: Ibid.

⁶⁰ The extract of the commercial treaty signed in 1783, in Constantinople between Russia and Turkey is available here: TNA/PRO/FO/352/61/5. Abstract of Articles of Treaties between Russia and Turkey – 1774 – 1849 – Subsisting April 4, 1854.

⁶¹ Viscount Palmerston to the Earl of Durham, Foreign Office, May 23, 1837. TNA/PRO/FO/352/61/3. N° 30.

