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 ***Disraeli and the Eastern Question (review)***

William Mulligan

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

Reviewed by:

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*William Mulligan (bio)*

*Disraeli and the Eastern Question*, by Miloš Kovič, trans. Miloš Damjanović; pp. xx + 339. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, £66.00, \$115.00.

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Benjamin Disraeli, Conservative prime minister between 1874 and 1880,

used epigrams to devastating effect in political debates in the House of Commons. Sometimes his witticisms were too sharp. In September 1876 his rival, W. E. Gladstone, erstwhile (and future) leader of the Liberal Party, published an account of atrocities perpetrated by Ottoman forces against civilians in Bulgaria. Entitled *Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East*, it was dismissed by Disraeli as “of all the Bulgarian horrors, perhaps the worst” (qtd. in Kovič 148). Disraeli’s reaction to the news of atrocities emerging from the Balkans revealed a very different sensibility from much of the British political nation. Why Disraeli reacted in this way and how he emerged triumphant on the Eastern Question at the 1878 Congress of Berlin is the subject of Miloš Kovič’s book. **[End Page 727]**

Combining an analysis of Disraeli’s literary oeuvre with an assessment of the finer details of high politics and diplomacy in the late 1870s, Kovič makes an important contribution to our understanding of the Eastern Question. Whereas Ann Pottinger Saab, in “Disraeli, Judaism, and the Eastern Question” (*International History Review* 10.4 [1988]), located Disraeli’s reaction within the context of Anglo-Jewish identities and politics, Kovič argues that Disraeli’s attitudes reflected his Romantic inheritance from the 1820s and 1830s. When he travelled across the Mediterranean in the late 1820s and early 1830s he showed more interest in Islamic culture and architecture than in Jewish communities and legacies. He found the Ottoman Empire exotic and was even capable of romanticising the extreme violence used to suppress revolts. Kovič argues that Disraeli also found escape in the Ottoman Empire from the petty humiliations he suffered in England as a result of his Jewish background. In the eastern Mediterranean he could act out a role which appealed to his sense of the dramatic.

Kovič uses Disraeli’s books—*Contarini Fleming* (1832), *Alroy* (1833), and *The Rise of Iskander* (1833)—to probe his subject’s attitudes to nation, empire, and race. Disraeli’s previous biographers, claims Kovič, have neglected the ways in which his changing views of democracy in the early 1830s shaped his attitude toward the question of nationality in European politics. He became more sympathetic to the plight of

nationalities in the region and less confident that the Ottoman Empire could survive in the long term, let alone reform and prosper. This argument requires further analysis, as Disraeli's alleged sympathies for national and democratic visions, evident in *Iskander*, were absent from his attitude to the Eastern crisis in the 1870s. Kovič himself shows how Disraeli feared that British support for the principle of nationality in the Balkans would rebound on his government's policy in Ireland.

Based on speeches and writings on foreign policy issues produced throughout the 1840s and 1850s, Kovič argues that Disraeli viewed the international system as a competitive arena shaped by power politics rather than by arbitration and international law. This marked him off from Gladstone. Both men had been followers of Robert Peel, and Kovič is correct to underline the centrality of foreign policy to their rivalry in the 1860s and 1870s. Unlike Gladstone, Disraeli considered Russia to be a substantial threat to British interests in Asia and Europe. For this reason, Disraeli supported Lord Palmerston during the Crimean War, though he was wary of the then prime minister's far-reaching war aims. By the time the Eastern Question erupted in the 1870s, Disraeli was predisposed to support the Ottoman Empire against Russia.

The second part of the book offers a study of high politics and diplomacy. Greatly to his credit, Kovič can switch from analysing literary sources and travel journals to making sense of the machinations of great power politics. He even integrates asides about Disraeli's worsening health into his assessment of the Congress of Berlin. This eye for detail is impressive and makes for an enjoyable read.

It remains a challenge for historians of international relations to...

Concerning the emphasis on views and policies rather than effects, I sometimes suspect that this is due not only to the natural British emphasis of any biographical approach to Gladstone, but also to a feeling that for all his initiatives he never achieved very much in Ireland. After all, to put things a little crudely, disestablishment in 1869 did not make much of a difference, and the 1870 Land Act was largely ineffective. The 1873 University Bill and the Home Rule bills of 1886 and 1893 did not pass. The 1881 Land Act was of major importance but ultimately not in ways that Gladstone had envisaged. In addition, the biography tradition naturally prefers dramatic high points, such as the introduction of plans for radical change (of which there were plenty in Gladstone's care or, whether or not they ever came to fruition). It is less interested in the day-to-day and cooperative aspects. Arguably, Gladstone's attempts to win Irish opinion to support for the Union through working with his colleagues, taking note (at least) of the public mood, and trying to strike the right balance between remedial reform and coercive legislation deserve much greater attention than they have received. Thus, in the area of the effectiveness of coercive legislation, in particular, many presumptions are made without much evidence. W. E. Vaughan includes an excellent study of the actual implementation of the 1871 Westmeath Act in *Landlords and Tenants in Mid-Victorian Ireland* (1994). But, to the best of my knowledge, no one has yet undertaken similar work on the coercion acts of 1881 or the Crimes Act of 1882.

*Gladstone and Ireland* contains valuable essays that take the traditional approach to the topic, but there are also aspects of the volume that gesture toward newer agendas that might complement it. Not the least of these is the theoretic framework or compass (as they call it) that Fleming and O'Day offer for attempts to address Irish discontent—'resistance, accommodation, conciliation and cooperation' (235). They see Gladstone's embrace of Home Rule as a change to the last of these that proved too much of a shock for many of his followers at the time but which was adopted by others in the different form of cooperation politics some fifteen years later. One of this approach's advantages is that it decentres the Grand Old Man to an extent and sees him as working within a larger continuum.

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