

A. L. MACFIE

THE STRAITS QUESTION, 1908-1914

The conclusion of the Anglo-Russian understanding of 1907 inaugurated a period of intense activity regarding the Turkish Straits. Hoping to exploit British assurances of sympathy and support for a change in the Straits regime in a sense favourable to herself, given during the negotiation of that agreement, Russia launched a series of initiatives designed to obtain the opening of the Straits to her ships-of-war; and when those efforts failed, and the Balkan Wars threatened the established position on the Straits, fearful lest another power forestall her, she began once again to consider a possible seizure of Constantinople and the adjacent area. The vigour and persistence of her diplomatic offensive, however, and her determination to secure her long term interests in the area, inevitably brought her into conflict with other great powers there, in particular Germany and Austria-Hungary. Increasingly, therefore, in these years the Straits question became entangled in the complex progression of events that heralded the First World War.

In their efforts to obtain a change in the Straits regime, the Russians first endeavoured to exploit the opportunities created by the Bosnia-Herzegovina question. In September 1907, and again in July-September 1908, Isvolsky, the Russian Foreign Minister, assured of the support of Russia's friends, Britain and France, and believing that Austria-Hungary would carry Germany with her, sought to persuade Aehrenthal, the Austrian Foreign Minister, to give an assurance of support for a modification of the Straits regime in a sense favourable to Russia, in exchange for Russian approval of the annexation by Austria-Hungary of Bosnia and Herzegovina¹. If Austria-Hungary agreed, Isvolsky intended to approach the Ottomans and to offer them Russian backing at any conference the powers might call to consider a revision of the Treaty of Berlin. He intended to suggest that, with Russian support, the Ottomans might obtain the evacuation of Austro-Hungarian troops from the Turkish Sanjak of Novi-Bazar; the abrogation of articles 23 and 61, which, in certain circumstances, gave the powers the right to interfere in the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire; and the abolition of the

1. W. L. Langer, "Russia, the Straits Question and the European Powers, 1904-8", *English Historical Review*, xliv., 1929 (hereinafter cited as Langer), pp. 69-74.

capitulations and foreign post-offices². He intended to approach also the Italians and to offer them, in return for support, Russian approval of the occupation by Italy of Tripolitania. In this way he hoped to secure, in a European conference, approval for a substantial change in the Straits regime.

On both occasions Isvolsky was frustrated. In January 1908, Austria-Hungary announced her Sanjak Railway project and the storm of protest in Russia forced him to defer his discussion of the Straits question with Aehrenthal³. In October 1908, Aehrenthal's premature announcement of the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina caused in Russia a second storm of protest and Isvolsky was again obliged to defer consideration of the question⁴. In any case it is doubtful whether he could have carried his project through. Britain and France had argued strongly that, in view of the hopeful character of the Young Turk Revolution of 23 July 1908, the timing of the initiative was inopportune: the Entente Powers should offer the new Turkey their benevolent support, untrammelled by complications⁵.

Isvolsky's efforts, however, were not entirely fruitless. In the course of a tour of Europe, undertaken in the autumn of 1908 in order to muster support for his project, he obtained conditional assurances of approval for a modification of the Straits régime in a sense favourable to Russia not only from Grey, Aehrenthal, and Tittoni, the Italian Prime Minister, but also from von Schoen, the German Foreign Minister⁶. Grey's commitment was, perhaps, the most specific. In a note dated 14 October 1908, in which the principle of partial reciprocity (free passage for Russia, access only as far as the Bosphorus for non-riverain powers) contained in his correspondence with Isvolsky was replaced by the principle of reciprocity in time of war, provided Turkey remained neutral, he stated;

His Majesty's Government ... agreeing in principle that some opening of the Straits is reasonable, cannot refuse to discuss the question. They

2. Public Record Office, London, Foreign Office (hereinafter cited as F.O.; Admiralty as Adm.) 800/180, Tu 08 15, Bertie to Hardinge, 7 Oct. 1908, and Tu 08 18, Hardinge to Bertie, 12 Oct. 1908; F.O. 800/73, Nicolson to Grey, 8 Oct. 1908; R. C. Helmreich, "A proposed Russian-Turkish Agreement of 1908", *Journal of Modern History*, xii, 1940; A. Isvolsky, *An Service de la Russie* (Paris, 1939), ii, pp. 308-12.

3. Langer, p. 70.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 75-77.

5. G. P. Gooch and H. W. V. Temperly (eds), *British Documents on the Origins of the War 1898-1914* (London, 1930-35), (hereinafter cited as B.D.), v, pp. 433-4; F.O. 800/180 Tu 08 11, Hardinge to Bertie, 30 July 1908; F.O. 800/19, Grey to Lowther, 11 Aug. 1908.

6. Langer, p. 74.

feel that a purely one-sided arrangement, which would give the Black Sea Powers in time of war the advantage of having the whole of the Black Sea as an inviolable harbour from which cruisers and commerce destroyers could issue and retire at will, free from pursuit by a belligerent, is not one for which public opinion in England is prepared or which it would be induced to accept.

Any arrangement, therefore, must be one which, while giving Russia and the riverain Powers egress at all times under some such limited conditions as M. Isvolsky had indicated, and securing them from menace of the establishment of foreign naval power in the Black Sea in time or Peace, would yet contain such an element of reciprocity as would in the eventuality of war, place belligerents on an equal footing with regard to the passage of the Straits.

His Majesty's Government would further observe that the consent of Turkey would be a necessary preliminary to any proposal. To put pressure upon Turkey at this moment to make an arrangement which she might regard, however unreasonably, as a menace to her interests would defeat what we believe in the joint object of England and Russia, viz., to prevent the overthrow of the present Turkish Government, and the confusion and anarchy which would probably result⁷.

This statement represented a compromise between those British ministers and officials who believed that the Straits should only be opened on a reciprocal basis, and those who believed Britain would have to concede to Russia special rights of passage. The majority, it would seem, held the first view. Sir F. Bertie, British Ambassador in Paris, expressed this forcibly in a private letter of 12 October 1908 to William Tyrrell, Grey's private secretary:

Are we going to give away the Straits? What will the public think, and perhaps say, if and when they learn that non-opposition to the ambition of Russia in the matter of the Straits was part of the price, but not declared, for the Anglo-Russian Understanding? ... the Black Sea ought, if any changes are to be made in the rules of the Straits, to be open to the ships of all nations with limits as to numbers at any one time in the Sea of Marmora, the Dardanelles and Bosphorus⁸.

7. F.O. E13027/27/44, Memo. respecting the Freedom of the Straits, Nicolson, 15 Nov. 1922, appendix, memo. on the Black Sea, the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, by Headlam-Morley, hist. adv. to the F.O., 7 Nov. 1922, annex II.

8. F.O. 800/180, Tu 0819, Bertie to Tyrrell, 12 Oct. 1908.

But Grey, having decided that the price would in any case have to be paid, had concluded, from a study of the strategic implications of the question, that the principle of reciprocity, as advocated by Bertie and others, would in reality, entail little advantage to Britain. In the existing circumstances no British fleet would attempt to enter the Black Sea or the Sea Marmora, unless Turkey were Britain's ally. The principle was, therefore, as Hardinge, Permanent Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, had put it, little more than a "shop-window ware"⁹. Britain should merely ensure that, as far as possible, any privileges accorded to Russia would not, in any essential respect, undermine Ottoman security. When, however, Grey had put this view to the cabinet, a majority of the ministers had refused to go along with it. They had feared that, if in time of war Turkey were to remain neutral, Russia would be able to use the Straits as a safe haven from which to attack the British fleet. They had insisted that, in such circumstances at least, the principle of reciprocity should apply. Grey had, therefore, persuaded Isvolsky to accept an assurance of support for an adjustment which, while allowing the riverain powers alone the right of ingress and egress in time of peace, would in time of war allow this right to belligerents¹⁰.

In their second effort to obtain the opening of the Straits, the Russians sought to exploit the opportunities created by Italy's occupation of Tripolitania. Acting on the assumption that the assurances and commitments obtained from the powers by Isvolsky in the autumn of 1908 (and in the case of Italy confirmed at a meeting held between the King of Italy and the Tsar at Racconigi in October 1909) remained effective, and seeking the fulfilment of the condition of preliminary Ottoman consent laid down by Grey in his note of 14 October 1908, Neratoff, who in the absence of Sazonov, was acting as foreign minister, in a despatch dated 2 October 1911, instructed Tcharykoff, the Russian Ambassador in Constantinople, to negotiate with the Ottomans a preliminary agreement regarding the Straits, which at some future date might be submitted to a conference of the powers signatory of the Treaty of Berlin for ratification¹¹. Tcharykoff was to offer the Porte guarantees concerning the *status quo* on the Straits; the renegotiation of the Anatolian Railroad agreement; Russian consent to an increase in Turkey's customs duties; and

9. B.D., v, pp. 434-5.

10. Ibid.; F.O. 800/341, Hardinge to Nicolson, 13 Oct. 1908.

11. P. Mosely, "Russian Policy in 1911-12", *Journal of Modern History*, xii, 1940 (herein-after cited as Mosely), p. 73; Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Paris (herein-after cited as A.M.A.E.), No 184, Bompard to de Selves, 9 Oct. 1911.

the use of Russia's good offices to stabilise the position in the Balkans¹². On putting these proposals to the Turks, Tcharykoff, on his own initiative, it would seem, added two more tempting morsels, a suggestion that Russia might consent to the revision of the capitulations and a hint that she might persuade Britain and France to elect Turkey a "partner" of the Triple Entente¹³.

The Russians worked hard to ensure the success of their second initiative. In Constantinople Tcharykoff paid repeated visits to the Grand Vizier. He pointed out to him the advantages to Turkey of the Russian proposals. The British and the French, he declared, inaccurately as it turned out, had already approved the negotiations. He did not know the views of the German government, but he foresaw no difficulty in that direction¹⁴. On 27 November 1911, he officially submitted to the Porte a draft agreement. Meanwhile Neratoff, on Tcharykoff's advice, had suggested to the Russian ministers in Sofia and Belgrade that the formula for a projected Serbo-Bulgarian alliance should be so framed that Turkey would be able to adhere to it¹⁵. Moreover, he had instructed his envoys in Paris, London, Berlin, Vienna and Rome to inform the governments to which they were accredited of the negotiations undertaken by Tcharykoff in Constantinople, and to seek their support and approval. On these instructions, Isvolsky, who had been appointed Ambassador in Paris following his resignation as Foreign Minister, acted with an excess of zeal. In what an official of the French Foreign Ministry described as "une note officieuse", he declared that, in return for Russian approval of the text of the France - German agreement on Morocco, he expected France to recognise Russia's complete freedom of action in the area of the Straits¹⁶.

Russia's second initiative, like the first, proved abortive. On 8 December 1911, Sazonov, on his way back to St. Petersburg through Paris, instructed Neratoff to drop the entire project and denied in the press that Russia had conducted official negotiations regarding the Straits: conversations at Constantinople had been of a private and personal nature and in no sense could it be considered that Tcharykoff had been acting in an official capacity¹⁷.

12. Mosely, p. 73.

13. A.M.A.E., N.S. No 184, Bompard to de Selves, 13 Oct. 1911.

14. *Ibid.*, Bompard to de Selves, 13 Oct. 1911, pt. II; F.O. 800/193B Lowther to Nicolson, 8 Nov. 1911.

15. Mosely, pp. 73-4.

16. A.M.A.E., N.S. No 184, Isvolsky to de Selves, 4 Nov. 1911.

17. B.D., ix, pt. I, p. 349; A.M.A.E., N.S. No. 184, de Selves to Bompard, 9 Dec. 1911, and de Panafieu to de Selves, 23 Dec. 1911.

Sazonov had good reason to hold his hand. The Turks had remained steadfastly opposed to any change regarding the Straits. The Grand Vizier had prevaricated, while seeking to obtain assurances of support against Russia from Britain, France, Germany and Austria-Hungary¹⁸. Aehrenthal had made it clear that he no longer considered himself bound by the agreement he had reached with Isvolsky¹⁹. Grey and de Selves, the French Foreign Minister, had, remained unenthusiastic²⁰. Only the Germans, who hoped to divide the Entente Powers, had given Russia any real encouragement, but even they had made no formal declaration of approval²¹.

Moreover, it had become increasingly evident, as Neratoff, himself, had remarked in a conversation with Panafieu, the French Ambassador in St. Petersburg, that the raising of the Straits question, at a time of acute international tension, might entail unwelcome consequences. It might drive Turkey further into the arms of the Central Powers. It might lead other European powers, both great and small, to state their claims on the Ottoman estate. It might even precipitate a crisis leading to the liquidation of the Empire²².

In the first months of the Tripolitanian War the Italians threatened to attack Turkey both at Salonika and on the Straits on a number of occasions; and on 18 April 1912 they bombarded the forts guarding the Dardanelles, so that the Porte was obliged to close the seaway to commercial shipping for a number of weeks²³. This closure proved particularly demaging to Russia, a large part of whose grain exports passed by way of the Straits to Europe; and to Britain, the principal carrier²⁴. On 22 April, therefore, Neratoff proposed that the neutral powers take collective action in Rome and Constantinople to prevent any interference with the use of the seaway by merchant shipping, but to no avail. None of the powers in fact believed that a case existed for intervention. As Grey, Poincaré and others pointed out on several occasions, they could hardly deny to Turkey the right to take whatever measures she deemed necessary in her own defence²⁵.

18. *Ibid.*, Bompard to de Selves, 6 Nov. 1911.

19. A.M.A.E., N.S. 184, Bompard to de Selves, 12 Dec. 1911.

20. B.D., ix., Pt. I, p. 313; A.M.A.E., N.S. No. 184, Note on the Straits question for the Minister, 9 Nov. 1911.

21. *Ibid.*, Bompard to de Selves, 20 Nov. 1911.

22. *Ibid.*, Panafieu to de Selves, 13 Oct. 1911, Saint Aulaire to de Selves, 12 Dec. 1911, and Bompard to de Selves, 10 Dec. 1911.

23. B.D., ix, pp. 386-7.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 389-90.

25. B. de Siebert, *Entente Diplomacy and the World, 1909-14* (London, 1921), (herein-

During the Balkan Wars, the Russians were mainly concerned to maintain the *status quo* on the Straits and to ensure that, in the event of a Bulgarian or great power occupation of Constantinople or any of the adjacent territories, Russia's vital interests in the area would be protected. To this end, in conjunction at times with their allies, they put pressure on the Balkan states, and in particular Bulgaria, to prevent them from occupying Constantinople and the area of the Straits, and let it be known that any attempt by any power to take permanent possession of the Ottoman capital would be treated as a *casus belli*²⁶. And when the Bulgarians did in fact press forward as far as the Chatalja Lines, they empowered their ambassador at Constantinople to summon the Black Sea fleet, should he deem it necessary²⁷.

The great powers, in general, supported Russia in her efforts to maintain the *status quo* on the Straits. At a conference of the ambassadors of the powers held in London in December 1912, in connection with the negotiation of a peace treaty following an armistice, they agreed with Russia that Turkey should be maintained in her possession of Constantinople and the Straits²⁸. Britain, in particular, wanted this, lest a collapse of the Ottoman Empire lead to a Russian occupation of Constantinople and trouble in the Muslim world. In their private discussions, however, the western powers were generally persuaded that if it were necessary to create a new order on the Straits, one involving some kind of international administration, neutralisation and possibly demilitarisation would be preferable to a Russian occupation²⁹.

In the Balkan Wars, as in the Tripolitanian War, the Straits were threatened with closure on a number of occasions³⁰. Once again, therefore, the Russians brought pressure to bear on the belligerents to avoid any action which might lead to closure; and sought the support of the powers for measures designed to secure free passage to the merchant vessels of neutrals. On this occasion, however, they made it clear that if any such closure were to occur, and if it were to be sustained, they would, independently if need be, take energetic steps to reopen the waterway³¹.

In the course of the wars, the Russians, despite their determination to maintain the *status quo* on the straits, could not resist the temptation to ex-

after cited as Siebert), pp. 170-1.

26. M. S. Anderson, *The Eastern Question* (London, 1966), p. 294.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, p. 295.

29. Siebert, pp. 415-17; B.D., ix, pt. II, pp. 93-4.

30. Adm. 116 1190 55107/12.

31. B.D., ix, pt. II, p. 952.

exploit the opportunities created by the conflict to follow up Isvolsky's initiative, the grounds for which had, as Sazonov noted in a confidential letter to Isvolsky, dated 28 November 1912, been well prepared³². Grey and Poincaré, who had replaced de Selves as French Foreign Minister, were therefore once again asked to confirm that they would support a modification of the Straits regime in a sense favourable to Russia³³. In the end, however, Sazonov decided not to proceed further. Increasingly concerned at the prospect of a European war, and aware, from the reports of his ambassador in London, that Britain would only participate in such a war, if the responsibility for aggression were to fall squarely on the opponents of the Triple Entente, he decided that, for the immediate future at least, it would be better if Russia were to act in an ostensibly disinterested manner³⁴.

As in the period before 1907, Russia's interest in the opening of the Straits to her ships-of-war was inspired largely by naval considerations. Nelidov, in a conversation with Sir Francis Bertie on 12 October 1908, stated that since Japan would not allow Russia to keep a fleet in the Far East, and since the Baltic was practically closed throughout the winter, it was essential for Russia that the Black Sea should be made "the home for the Russian fleet whence she can move to the Mediterranean, the Baltic and the Far East as necessity may require"³⁵.

The ominous changes in the international scene which had led Sazonov to abandon the Isvolsky - Neratoff initiative, combined with the instability of the position on the Straits created by the Tripolitanian and Balkan Wars, prompted the Russians to reconsider the problem of the Straits. In a Foreign Office memorandum, composed sometime in November 1912, and amended by Prince Trubetzkoy, Chief of the Political Division, it was stated that, while in the long run only the occupation of Constantinople and the adjacent areas would adequately secure her interests on the Straits, in the existing circumstances Russia could not attempt a radical solution. A Russian occupation of Constantinople would merely lead to a scramble for territory by the other powers. Russia would not then be able to maintain the principle she had adopted —that the Balkans should be kept for the Balkan peoples alone. Nor could she accept the internationalisation and neutralisation of the Straits,

32. Siebert, pp. 415-7.

33. *Ibid.*; B.D., ix, pt. II, pp. 277-278.

34. Siebert, pp. 404-6; G. B. Zotiades, "Russia and the Question of Constantinople and the Turkish Straits during the Balkan Wars", *Balkan Studies*, ii, 1970 (hereinafter cited as Zotiades), p. 292.

35. F.O. 800/180, Tu 08 17, Bertie to Hardinge, 12 Oct. 1908.

as these would merely facilitate the entry of foreign warships into the Black Sea in time of war. Russia should seek first to obtain a base on the upper Bosphorus, by lease, or cession, and, at a later date, the consent of the powers to the neutralisation and demilitarisation of the Dardanelles. This arrangement, while securing the closure of the Black Sea against an enemy fleet, would enable a Russian fleet, in time of need, to enter the Mediterranean. Meanwhile, on the diplomatic front, Russia should ensure that no agreement was arrived at likely to obstruct Russian expansion in the area³⁶.

This view, however, was challenged by Prince Lieven, Chief of Staff of the Russian Admiralty. He believed that the creation of a Russian base on the Bosphorus was impractical, since it would absorb prodigious amounts of men, money and materials. It would neither ensure possession of the area, nor free access for the Russian Black Sea fleet to the Mediterranean. Russia should either appropriate the whole territory which separated her from the shores of the Straits or nothing. A fragment on both sides of the Straits would only become a source of needless worry and weakness. For the time being Russia should build up her naval power in the Black Sea and use it to force the Sultan to admit the right of passage to Russian ships-of-war. She should then demand the destruction of the fortifications on the Dardanelles, and secure right of anchorage and coaling stations on the Straits and the Sea of Marmora. Eventually, she might annex the whole region³⁷.

In December 1913, Russia's concern over the Straits was further exacerbated by the dispatch of a German military mission to Turkey. To this mission the Russians objected on the grounds that the chief of the mission, Liman van Sanders, was to be given command of the First Army Corps, based on Constantinople. They believed this arrangement would place the Sublime Porte under German protection and give Germany effective control of the Straits defences, thus destroying the balance of power which was the only guarantee of Ottoman survival³⁸.

The Russians made clear to the Germans, in interviews which Kokovtzeff, the Russian President of the Council, described as being of a vehement character, the nature and extent of their objections. The Germans replied that they had simply responded to persistent Ottoman requests for assistance. These, in Turkey's hour of need, they could hardly reject. They believed

36. Zotiades, pp. 286-290.

37. Ibid.

38. Siebert, p. 678; R. J. Kerner, "The Mission of Liman von Sanders", *Slavonic Review* vi, 1927-8, II, pp. 346-50.

the mission would continue the work previously undertaken by General von der Goltz. In any case, the defeat of Turkey by the Balkan powers had damaged Germany's own prestige, which must be re-established. As for the appointment of von Sanders to the command of the First Army Corps, a command which, the Ottomans had informed them, did not include the Straits defences, his presence in the Ottoman capital was necessary merely so that he should be in touch with the central offices and training schools of the Turkish army³⁹.

Sazonov, unable to persuade the Germans to modify the proposed arrangement, endeavoured to enlist Britain and France in an effort to make Turkey alter course. The British and the French, however, had no desire to become engaged in a struggle with Germany over Russia's interests in the Straits. The British, in particular, feared that Russia would settle with Germany, leaving her allies in the lurch⁴⁰. When called on for their support, therefore, both powers agreed merely to ask the Porte whether "the independence of the [Ottoman] Empire was safeguarded in the contract concerning the employment of German officers", and whether the proposed arrangements "impaired the actual state of the Dardanelles"⁴¹. The Ottomans responded that it was their business to protect their own independence. No foreign power had any right to interfere⁴².

The British and the French recognised, however, that as the Triple Entente was in jeopardy, they might have to support Russia in any action she might take against Turkey. On 29 December 1913, therefore, Grey asked Sazonov what were his minimum demands — alteration of contract or compensation; what coercive measures had he in view and to what extreme measures would he resort, should Turkey, supported by Germany, refuse to give way⁴³. On 1 January 1914, Doumergue, French Foreign Minister, asked Sazonov what measures of coercion Russia proposed to adopt⁴⁴. In response to these enquiries, Sazonov was forced to admit that he had not made up his mind. As he informed Buchanan, British Ambassador in St. Petersburg, on 7 January 1914, he could not specify any compensation which would indemnify Russia for the privileged position Germany was likely to acquire at Constantinople. Nor could he specify the measures Russia would take

39. Siebert, pp. 376-7; B.D., x, pt. I, p. 364; H. J. Kerner, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 348-50.

40. P.O. 800/180, Tu 13 16; private letter, 2 Dec. 1913.

41. R. J. Kerner, *op. cit.*, III, p. 549.

42. *Ibid.*

43. Siebert, p. 696.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 700-1.

against Turkey, though these might include a suspension of financial aid, a refusal to approve the proposed increase in the Turkish customs duties, and the occupation of a number of Turkish ports or a portion of Turkish territory. He would wait another week or ten days for a communication from Berlin. If no suitable reply were received, he would ask the allies to take retaliatory action against Turkey. Any failure on the part of Britain or France to support Russia would be fatal to the Entente⁴⁵.

On 13 January 1914, Sazonov convened a conference of ministers to consider the issues raised by Grey and Doumergue. The ministers agreed that the appointment of a German general to the command of Turkish troops was inadmissible; a German officer might, however, be given a commission for general inspection of the Turkish army. As regards measures of compulsion, the ministers approved a programme, drawn up by the Foreign Ministry, which followed the pattern suggested by Sazonov in his conversation with Buchanan. As for the extreme lengths to which Russia would go, the point which most interested Grey and Doumergue, the members agreed that, without the active participation of Britain and France, Russia could not adopt means of pressure likely to involve her in war with Germany⁴⁶.

Sazonov, however, was not called upon to convey the decisions of the conference to his entente friends. Even while the conference was sitting, reports arrived that the Germans had decided to adopt a compromise solution, whereby Liman von Sanders would be appointed Inspector General of the Turkish Army, a rank independent of territorial command⁴⁷. This solution satisfied the Russian ministers and Sazonov was, therefore, quickly able to resolve the crisis.

Continued anxiety, however, regarding the instability of the position on the Straits led Sazonov to convene on 21 February 1914, another conference, composed of ministers and experts, to study the means by which Russia might accomplish a rapid seizure of Constantinople and the adjacent area. At this conference it was agreed that, as Russia could not, with the means available, mount such an operation effectively, the ministries and departments concerned should at once put in hand measures to speed up the process of mobilisation, to improve the provision of transport, to strengthen the Black Sea fleet and to provide for the construction of strategic rail-

45. B.D., x, pt. I, pp. 412-4.

46. F. Stieve, *Isvolsky and the World War* (London, 1926), (hereinafter cited as Stieve), appendix II.

47. Siebert, p. 706.

ways in the Caucasus⁴⁸. The conference could not agree, however, on the strategic implications of the operation. Cavalry General Zhilinsky, Chief of the General Staff, argued that, should the operation involve European complications, Russia would be compelled to concentrate the bulk of her force on the western front. It was there that the issue would be decided. Lieutenant General Danilov, Quartermaster General of the General Staff, supported Zhilinsky:

The only good strategy is strong strategy. The war on our western front would demand the utmost application of all the forces of the State, and we could not dispense with a single army corps in order to leave it behind for special tasks. We must direct our energies to ensuring success in the most important theatre of war. With victory in this theatre we should secure favourable decisions in all secondary questions⁴⁹.

With this view Commander Nemitz, Chief of the Second Operation Section of the General Staff, disagreed. He pointed out that victory over the Central Powers would not necessarily enable Russia to obtain possession of the Straits. While Russia was engaged in the west, Britain and France might occupy them. This Russia must not allow: she must, herself, seize them. Only then would she be sure of obtaining European consent to a solution of the Straits question under the conditions she required⁵⁰.

The failure of Russia and her allies to obtain the right to pass ships-of-war through the Straits effectively diminished whatever chance remained of them imposing their will on Turkey in the eventuality of war. Moreover, the persistence with which Russia had sought to obtain for her ships-of-war rights of passage through the Straits—a modification of the Straits regime which the Ottomans believed would presage the occupation of their capital and the end of their empire—combined with the evident unwillingness of Britain and France to oppose Russia on the issue, served merely to convince Ottoman statesmen that they could no longer rely on the Entente Powers to secure the survival of their empire. As a result they were increasingly tempted to turn to Germany for support. In so far as the Straits question played a part in shaping the events of the First World War, therefore, it may be assumed that it tended to create in Turkey an inclination to side, not with the Entente, but with the Central Powers.

48. Stieve, appendix III, pp. 245-6.

49. *Ibid.*, pp. 234-5.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 235.