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**British Foreign Policy in the Near East, 1916-1922:  
Questions of Responsibility**

David Lloyd George, the British prime minister and leader of the coalition government that governed Great Britain, from December 1916 - October 1922, in the period of the First World War, has frequently been held responsible for the failure of Britain's Near Eastern policy in the post-war period<sup>1</sup>. A note on the issue, drawn up by Sir Maurice Hankey, the secretary to the cabinet, in October 1922, in the midst of the so-called Chanak crisis (when Turkish nationalist troops, advancing on the Straits, threatened to overrun the British occupation forces stationed there and provoke war), at the instigation of Austen Chamberlain, the leader of the Unionist Party in the House of Commons, who wished to rebut charges of clumsiness and ineptitude made against Lloyd George and the coalition government by H. H. Asquith, a previous wartime leader, would suggest that this was not the case. Far from being the architect of Britain's Near Eastern policy in the post-war period, and therefore by implication responsible for its failure, Hankey's note makes it clear that Lloyd George was throughout merely pursuing the policy laid down by the previous administration, the essential principles of which remained unchanged<sup>2</sup>.

It is not surprising that Asquith's speech, which was given before the annual conference of the Scottish Liberal Federation, on 6 October 1922, caused Lloyd George and his colleagues in the coalition government great offence. For in his speech Asquith had accused them of "clumsiness and ineptitude" in the execution of their Near Eastern policy

1. For accusations that Lloyd George was responsible for the failure of Britain's Near Eastern policy see A. E. Montgomery, "Lloyd George and the Greek Question, 1918-1922", in A. J. P. Taylor (Ed.) *Lloyd George*, Hamish Hamilton, 1971; and H. Nicolson, *Curzon: The Last Phase*, Constable 1934, Ch. 4.

2. House of Lords Record Office, Lloyd George Collection, F/209/6 Notes prepared by Sir M. Hankey, October 1922.

—a policy which had taken Britain to the brink of an “unnecessary war”. In dispatching the appeal to the dominions of 16 September 1922 (for military support for the British position at Chanak), without receiving, it was said, the prior approval of Lord Curzon, the British foreign secretary, Lloyd George and his colleagues (Chamberlain, Churchill, Birkenhead, Balfour and Worthington Evans) had sounded a “double note of provocation and panic”. As a result France and Italy had withdrawn their forces from the Asiatic side of the Straits, while the dominion leaders, wise enough to enquire what their troops would be fighting for, before dispatching them to the area, had prevaricated. The situation was becoming ever more dangerous. Only the tact and prudence, displayed by General Harington, the British commander in Constantinople, it seemed, had prevented war<sup>3</sup>.

In Asquith’s view the “clumsiness and ineptitude” displayed by Lloyd George, in dealing with the present crisis, contrasted strikingly with the remarkable patience and forbearance shown by his own government, in the months immediately preceding the outbreak of the First World War. Then diplomacy, conducted not by “amateurs in Downing Street”, but by Sir Edward Grey, the “greatest and most experienced foreign minister in Europe”, had exhausted every possible means of avoiding the “arbitrament” of war. They had now two foreign offices, one on each side of Downing Street, neither of which knew what the other side was doing. Never before had the head of one of the great departments of state (Curzon) been subjected to so many “spasmodic”, “impetuous” and often “ill - informed” incursions upon his domain, leading to commitments made “behind his back” or “over his head”. The present prime minister’s secretariat was an “excrescence”, which had been grafted onto the fabric of government. What they were witnessing was the substitution of an “intermittant and incalculable dictatorship”, for an old and well tried system of government<sup>4</sup>.

It was specifically to rebut these accusations, particularly those of clumsiness, ineptitude and amateurishness, that Hankey’s note was, at the request of Austin Chamberlain, drawn up. In his note, one of the clearest accounts of British Near Eastern policy penned by a British

3. *Times*, 7 October 1922, 12 a. Mr. Asquith on the Crisis.

4. *Ibid*.

official in the period, Hankey makes it clear that the Near Eastern policy pursued by Lloyd George, far from being of recent conception, was in all its essentials, the "heir" of the earlier policy the "professional" diplomats Asquith so much admired had laid down. Every significant decision, Hankey declared, had been made by British and Allied statesmen of the greatest possible experience. In so far as the policy had failed, it had failed because of events beyond the control of the British government (the collapse of Russia, the rise of the Kemalist movement in Anatolia, the refusal of the Americans to accept a mandate for the Armenian provinces, the return of King Constantine, an enemy of the Entente Powers, to the Greek throne, and French and Italian betrayal)<sup>5</sup>.

Whence, Hankey went on to enquire, arose the difficulties of the present government with regard to its Near Eastern policy? Not from any decision made by Lloyd George or one of his colleagues, but from the decision made by the previous government, led by Mr. Asquith, to partition Turkey (the Ottoman Empire). True, the initial move had been made by the Russians. On 4 March 1915, in the midst of the Dardanelles campaign, they had laid claim to Constantinople and the Straits. But it was Asquith's own government that, on 12 March, had accepted the Russian claim, subject to the proviso that the war be fought to a successful conclusion, and that Britain and France realise their desiderata in the Ottoman Empire and elsewhere. Immediately thereafter, Britain, France and Russia had concluded with Italy the Treaty of London, of 26 April 1915, which secured the entry of Italy into the First World War on the side of the Entente Powers. Article 9 of this treaty promised that, in the event of the Allies occupying any part of Turkey in Asia, Italy would secure a just share in the Mediterranean region bordering the province of Adalia (Antalya).

While this agreement was being negotiated Asquith set up an independent committee, chaired by Sir Maurice de Bunsen, to consider and report on British desiderata with regard to Turkey—in—Asia. Members of this committee included George Clerk of the Foreign Office, Sir T. W. Holderness of the India Office, Admiral Sir Henry Jackson, Gene-

5. For accounts of the peace settlement in the Near and Middle East see M. E. Yapp, *The Making of the Modern Near East, 1792-1923*, Longman 1987; H. Nicolson, *Curzon: The Last Phase, 1919-1925*; and A. L. Macfie, *The End of the Ottoman Empire*, Longman 1998.

ral Calwell, Sir Mark Sykes and Sir H. Llewellyn-Smith. The committee put forward four alternative schemes for a Turkish settlement, and though none was specifically adopted, the report submitted provided the material out of which the so-called Sykes-Picot Agreement, of January - May 1916, was fashioned. This agreement provided a "definite scheme for the partition of the non-Turkish portion of the Turkish Empire"<sup>6</sup>.

One point of great interest in the committee's report, Hankey remarks, is that it distinctly contemplated that Greece, if she came into the war, on the Allied side, would get Smyrna (Izmir)<sup>7</sup>. As regards the

6. F/209/6 Notes. For accounts of the secret treaties, negotiated by the Allies in the First World War, see R. J. Kerner, "Russia, the Straits and Constantinople, 1914-1915", *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 1; W. W. Gottlieb, *Studies in Secret Diplomacy*, Allen and Unwin 1957; E. Kedourie, *England and the Middle East*, Bowes and Bowes, 1956; A. S. Klieman, "Britain's War Aims in the Middle East in 1915", *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 3, 1968; and A. L. Macfie, *The Straits Question*, Institute for Balkan Studies, 1993.

7. Hankey's note is accompanied by the following appendix, entitled "Extracts from the Report of an Interdepartmental Committee on British Desiderata in Turkey - in Asia, June 30th, 1915", parts of which are underlined:

#### *Course (B) - Zones of Interest*

52. It may prove difficult to induce France and Italy to consent to abandon all territorial expansion. Russia in any case gets Constantinople; *Greece, if she comes in, Smyrna*; and Great Britain will retain the whole or a considerable part of the Basra vilayet. Thus the Eastern and Western gates of Turkey will be British and Russian, and it is natural to expect that France and Italy will demand their own doors with their own latchkeys. On the other hand, it was our special and recognised position in the Persian Gulf, and the necessity for us to consolidate that position, which led to the capture of Basra, and to the assurances we gave to the local chiefs and inhabitants. *It is admitted that Russia's reward shall be Constantinople, and that Smyrna may have to be given to Greece.* The problem to be settled by the Allies is the fate of Turkey, shorn of Constantinople, the European provinces, Basra, *and possibly Smyrna*, and it is reasonable to propose that, apart from the assignation of Constantinople to Russia, Basra to Great Britain, *and Smyrna to Greece*, the Turkish Empire should not be further dismembered, especially as France and Italy get large compensation in Europe. In that Empire, however, each Power, including Italy, has special interests in various regions, and they should communicate to one another the limits of the areas where they consider they are entitled to acquire a privileged position. Our area would be that described in paragraphs 34 and 35.

#### *Course (C) - The Maintenance of an Independent Ottoman Empire organised as at Present.*

70. Under this scheme Turkey would continue as an independent Empire outside of Europe on some such terms as the following:

- (1) That Turkey cedes to Russia Constantinople and the rest of its European territory, except such portion as may be ceded to Bulgaria, and the peninsula which separates

Sykes-Picot Agreement, it is not clear whether it ever came before cabinet, as no cabinet minutes were kept in those days, but it was discussed once by the War Committee, on 23 March 1916. Lloyd George was present at the meeting but took no part in the discussion. The agreement, which was concluded behind Italy's back, had been negotiated by a man (Sykes) who, though a "gallant soldier" and a "great gentleman", could hardly be considered a "trained diplomatist"<sup>78</sup>.

Such, Hankey concludes, was the legacy which Mr. Asquith and Sir Edward Grey, the "professionals", bequeathed to Mr. Lloyd George's government of "amateurs" in December 1916.

Thereafter, according to Hankey, the part played by Lloyd George in the formulation of Near Eastern policy was at best marginal. At the Paris peace conference, questions concerning the Near and Middle East were in the first instance invariably referred to committees of experts. Only when those committees had completed their work were the relevant issues passed on to the Supreme Council, a body made up not of "amateurs" but of prime ministers and foreign secretaries of great experience.

The committee investigating the question of Greek territorial claims was attended by British, French, Italian and American delegations. The British, French and American delegations agreed that western and eastern Thrace should pass to Greece; but the Italian delegation, whilst agreeing in principle, entered certain reservations. With regard to Smyrna, the British and French delegations agreed that it should be assigned to Greece; but the American delegation opposed the detachment of the area from Turkey, and the Italian delegation refused to discuss the issue, until a general settlement had been arrived at. Nevertheless, at the peace conference a decision was taken, in May 1919, by the Supreme Council, to invite the Greeks to send an expeditionary force to Smyrna, supposedly to avert a massacre there. Initially, this

the Gulf of Ismid from the Black Sea.

- (2) That in certain contingencies Turkey cedes to Greece Smyrna and a suitable hinterland.

Advantages  
and Disadvantages  
of Scheme (C)

71. The advantages of the above scheme are as follows:

- (e) As regards Greece, her aspirations would be realised as fully as she could hope.

8. F/209/6 Notes.

decision was taken in the absence of M. Orlando, the Italian prime minister, who had left Paris over the Fiume question; but when it became known that he had decided to return, action was suspended for forty eight hours, with the result that M. Orlando "accepted the proposal in principle", and "Italian troops cooperated in the landing"<sup>9</sup>.

The second act of the Paris peace conference relating to Greece was the very notable reply, communicated by M. Clemenceau, on behalf of the Allied and Associated Powers, to the Turkish delegation in June 1919. This indicated some of the principles on which the proposed peace settlement would be based. It was, Hankey declared, an open secret that this declaration was drafted by Mr. Balfour, the foreign minister. The "amateurs" who approved it were M. Clemenceau, President Wilson, Mr. Lloyd George and Baron Sonnino.

According to Hankey, the difficulties which had arisen in the Near and Middle East with regard to the drafting of a Turkish peace treaty were primarily a consequence of the delay caused by President Woodrow Wilson's decision to return home to consult his fellow-countrymen regarding the possibility of their accepting an American mandate for the Armenian provinces, and by his subsequent collapse. Not until early in 1921 did it become possible to undertake serious negotiations. The greater part of the draft treaty, later signed at Sèvres on 10 August 1920, was then drawn up, at a conference held in London in February - April 1920; and the process was completed at San Remo, 18-20 April. It has sometimes been suggested that this was an "amateur" treaty, drawn up at 10 Downing Street, under the sole and immediate guidance of the prime minister. But such was not the case. Out of thirty eight meetings held in London only sixteen were attended by Mr. Lloyd George. The remainder were held at the Foreign Office, and were presided over by Lord Curzon, who only missed two meetings out of the thirty eight, at neither of which was the prime minister present. At San Remo all the meetings were attended both by the prime minister and Lord Curzon, who worked in "complete harmony". Foreign Office experts were present throughout.

Following the completion of a draft Turkish peace treaty, but before

9. *Ibid.* For an account of the despatch of the Greek expeditionary force to Smyrna see H. Nicolson, *Curzon: The Last Phase, 1919-1925*, Ch. 4.

its signature, the British government, advised by Sir Henry Wilson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, was obliged to accept a Greek offer of military support for the Allied position in Constantinople and the Straits, threatened by an advance of Turkish nationalist forces; and shortly thereafter a similar Greek offer to clear the area of nationalist troops. Could these decisions, taken by Mr. Lloyd George and M. Millerand, the French premier, at a hastily arranged meeting, held at Lymne, in Kent, on 19-20 June 1920, and at a meeting of the Supreme Council, held at Boulogne, the following day, be described as "amateurish"? Not according to Hankey. At Lymne the Turkish question had been raised as a matter of urgency. Mr. Lloyd George and M. Millerand had accordingly decided to accept the offers of Greek support, but only after consulting Marshal Foch and Sir Henry Wilson, who had both given their approval. On 21 June a plan for a Greek advance in western Anatolia was formally adopted at the Boulogne conference, which was attended also by delegations from Italy, Japan and Belgium. Great Britain was represented not only by the prime minister but also by Lord Curzon, Austin Chamberlain, Sir Henry Wilson and Lord Derby. In no sense, therefore, could the decisions taken be described as "amateur"<sup>10</sup>.

The difficulties caused to the Allies by delay in the drafting of a Turkish peace treaty and the subsequent withdrawal of America, were, according to Hankey, further exacerbated by the defeat inflicted on Venizelos, the Greek prime minister, in an election held in November 1920. Thereafter the French, in particular, refused to treat Greece as an ally; and both French and Italian policy took a "more definitely Turkish orientation". As a result the Greeks found themselves increasingly isolated, unable to arm or equip their forces; while the Turkish nationalists, supplied and equipped by the Bolsheviks, and encouraged by an Italian evacuation of Antalya and a French withdrawal from Cilicia, were further strengthened. Attempts, made at the London conference of February - March 1921 and elsewhere, to secure a negotiated settlement between the Greeks and the Turkish nationalists came to nothing. Military issues were invariably referred to a committee of military, naval and air experts, under the chairmanship of Marshal Foch. Matters at no stage

10. For an account of the Allied decision to authorise a Greek advance in western Anatolia, see A. L. Macfie, *The Straits Question*, Ch. 4.

passed out of the hands of the Foreign Office. Here again no accusation of “amateur” diplomacy could be sustained. Mr. Asquith should take note: “People who live in glass houses should not throw stones!”<sup>11</sup>.

Austin Chamberlain, on receipt of Hankey’s note, lost no time in launching his counter-attack on Asquith. In an address, presented to the members of the Midland Conservative Club in Birmingham, on 13 October 1922, Chamberlain, after defending the actions of his Unionist colleagues in the coalition government and expatiating on the dangers posed by the rise of the Labour Party, launched into a powerful defence of the government’s Near Eastern policy, based almost entirely on Hankey’s note. The Unionists, he declared, had not criticised the foreign policy of the Liberal government before the war. Yet now, in the midst of a crisis, provoked by a Kemalists attempt to try conclusions with the Allies and seize control of Constantinople and the Straits, they were accused by the opposition of “criminal folly”, in not withdrawing their forces, along with the French and Italians, to the European side of the Straits. The opposition should take note that the government had not initiated a new policy. There was no “clean slate”. The policy pursued was essentially that laid down by Asquith’s own government in the opening months of the war. It was Asquith who, in a speech given at the Guild Hall in November 1914, had declared that the actions of Turkey, in entering the war on the side of the Central Powers, had “rung the deathknell” of the Ottoman Empire. It was Sir Edward Grey who had concluded the Constantinople agreement with Russia in March-April 1915; and it was he who had concluded the Treaty of London with Italy. Later Asquith and Grey had authorised Sir Mark Sykes to conclude the Sykes - Picot Agreement, arranging for a partition of the Arab provinces. Delay had affected the drafting of a peace treaty with the defeated Ottoman Empire, but this was not the fault of the coalition government. Following the dropping out of America, the peace treaty had been drawn up, not by Lloyd George, but by a committee of ambassadors and experts, under the chairmanship of Lord Curzon. The outcome was the Treaty of Sèvres of 10 August 1920. The policy of His Majesty’s Government, in short, was based entirely on the principles laid down,

11. F/209/6 Notes.



and the agreements entered into, by Mr. Asquith<sup>12</sup>.

Nor, when circumstances had conspired to make the full implementation of the Treaty of Sèvres impossible, had the government refused to negotiate a compromise settlement. On the contrary, acting in conjunction with their allies, they had made several significant concessions. But no settlement had been arrived at, and at Chanak, deserted by their allies, the French and the Italians, they had been obliged to make a stand. Advised that control of the Asiatic shore of the Dardanelles was essential if control of the sea passage and the security of the Allied position in Constantinople was to be maintained, they had decided to oppose the advancing Turkish forces. As a result they had succeeded in concluding, at Mudania, an armistice which, it was hoped, the Kemalists would now respect<sup>13</sup>.

Hankey's note should not, of course, be taken at face value. A powerful case can be made out in support of the contention that Lloyd George played an active part in backing Greek claims to the possession of eastern Thrace and Smyrna in the period of the post-war peace settlement in the Near East. In particular, he is known to have supported a Greek claim, put forward in the autumn of 1918, in the closing weeks of the war, for the possession of additional territory in Anatolia; and to have approved the Greek advance in June 1920, when other options, including a substantial Greek reinforcement of the Allied position on the Straits (the choice initially preferred by the British Chief of the Imperial General Staff), were available. Following King Constantine's return to the Greek throne, though obliged to withdraw wholehearted support for the Greek cause, it is well known that he remained sympathetic, taking what action he could to assist the new government. In August 1921 he personally persuaded Briand, the French premier, to permit the Greeks to resume the purchase of arms<sup>14</sup>. No such sympathy was shown for the Turks, nationalist or other. In the discussions regarding a possible expulsion of the sultan and his government from

12. *Times*, 14 October 1922, 12a, Mr. Chamberlain's Appeal. Lloyd George made a similar speech in Manchester on 14 October 1922, defending Chanak and mocking the opposition. The Unionist Party meeting at the Carlton Club, which led to the collapse of the coalition government, took place on 19 October.

13. *Ibid.*

14. A. E. Montgomery, "Lloyd George and the Greek Question".

Constantinople, which took place in 1919-1920, Lloyd George invariably backed the Foreign Office view, put forward by Curzon, in favour of expulsion, as against the India Office, War Office and Admiralty view, that the sultan should be allowed to remain in his capital—the view, that is, which eventually prevailed<sup>15</sup>.

Nevertheless the essential case, put forward by Hankey in his note, that the Near Eastern policy, pursued by Lloyd George in the period of the post-war peace settlement, was erected on the foundations laid by Asquith and his colleagues in the first half of the war, cannot be gainsaid. For it was Asquith's policy of accommodating Russian claims to the possession of Constantinople and the Straits, Italian demands for a "just share" in the Mediterranean region, adjoining Adalia, Greek claims to the possession of Smyrna and French claims to the possession of Syria and Cilicia (accepted in the Sykes-Picot Agreement) that made a partition of the Ottoman Empire, in the event of the empire suffering defeat in the First World War, inevitable. The policy of partition, once put in place, proved irreversible, as later events showed. Schemes were even drawn up for the creation of an independent Armenian state, an autonomous Kurdistan and a partition of the remaining Turkish territories in Anatolia, into British, French and Italian spheres of interest. In these circumstances Lloyd George had little choice but to go along with the prevailing policy. The fact that he enthusiastically endorsed it made little difference. British support for a Greek acquisition of Smyrna and eastern Thrace, far from being a consequence of Lloyd George's Grecophilia, was simply a product of British strategic interest in the area. Greek possession of Smyrna would secure Allied (British) control of western Anatolia, while Greek possession of eastern Thrace would secure Allied (British) control of the Dardanelles, considered at the time a British imperative.

Hankey's note, written by an insider, in the midst of the Chanak crisis, provides valuable confirmation that the British plans to partition the Ottoman Empire originated with the Russian claim to the possession of Constantinople and the Straits; that for the most part the policy adopted was worked out not by the politicians involved but by Foreign Office, War Office, India Office and Admiralty "experts"; that delays in

15. A. L. Macfie, *The Straits Question*, Ch. 3.

the drafting of the Treaty of Sèvres were caused mainly by the desire to involve America in the final settlement; that from the beginning it was contemplated that Greece, if she came into the war, would get Smyrna; and that, despite accusations to the contrary, Lloyd George played little if any part in the formulation of policy. The Near Eastern policy he pursued, in other words, was the outcome not of his own volition, but of a series of fundamental decisions made by his predecessors, Asquith and Grey. As Hankey's note shows, it was not so much a policy as an inheritance.