

RUSSIA AND THE QUESTION OF CONSTANTINOPLE AND THE TURKISH STRAITS DURING THE BALKAN WARS

The years after 1904 were marked by intense international efforts to create a Balkan Alliance. Austria-Hungary favored the creation of a bloc consisting of Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and Rumania, with either Turkey or Greece as the fourth member. Serbia was omitted from the bloc, because Serbia was to be the victim of Austrian aggression. The purpose of this bloc was to check Russian penetration in the Balkans. Russia, on the other hand, strove vigorously to bring together the two slavic nations of the Balkans. In 1909 Russian diplomats tried to sponsor an alliance of the Slavic nations with Turkey, based on the *status quo*. When Sazonov took over the foreign policy of Russia in 1910, he followed the policy of promoting an alliance of Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Montenegro, which in the event of a breakdown of the existing Turkish regime or of any other eventuality, bringing about a general conflict in the Balkans, would offer a substantial obstacle "to an advance of Austria Southward."¹ This alliance, however, was to be preceded by a rapprochement of the Slavic nations, of Bulgaria and Serbia, which were traditionally at loggerheads. The efforts of Russia were motivated not only by the desire of developing a bloc which would bring to an end Austro-Germanic influence and designs in the Near East, but also by the wish to enhance her prestige in the Balkans. Since this bloc was to be on the side of Russia's allies, the Entente approved and encouraged the efforts of St Petersburg.

The bringing together of the Slavic nations of the Balkans proved at this precedent more difficult than had been anticipated. *In spite of the efforts of Russia, relations between Bulgaria and Serbia deteriorated after 1905 and even reached a critical stage in 1908.*² The differences between Bulgaria and Serbia

1. British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898-1914, edited by Gooch, G.P. and Temperley, H., ix, i, No. 194, O'Beirne to Grey, Oct. 20, 1910.

2. British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898-1914, edited by Gooch, G.P., and Temperley, H., ix., i. No. 194, O'Beirne to Grey, Oct. 20, 1910.

were set forth in a memorandum sent by the Serbian foreign office to the ministers in St Petersburg, London, Paris, and Rome in July, 1909. "The Bulgarian dissatisfaction with Serbia," was stated in the memorandum, "is caused, no matter what reasons one might advance, solely and alone by the fact that they feel that Serbia is the chief obstacle to the realization of their aspirations. They desire that the Macedonian Question should be purely a Bulgarian matter. The more the Serbian element in Macedonia gives evidence of its power, the sharper the tension between Bulgaria and Serbia will become."³ That the rival claims on Macedonia were at the bottom of the difficulties between Bulgaria and Serbia was clearly stated by Stanchov in his discussion of foreign relations before the Bulgarian Sobranje⁴ on November 20, 1907. Bulgaria refused to enter into any alliance which might prove detrimental to her aspirations in Macedonia. Serbia, on the other hand, and this is important, was not willing to abandon her claims on Macedonia, in spite of her desire to strengthen her position against Austria by an alliance with Bulgaria. *As a result, all negotiations between the two states were dropped in 1910 in spite of Russia's recommendations.* Both Serbia and Bulgaria turned to Turkey and tried to negotiate a rapprochement with the Sublime Porte, but their efforts were not satisfactory.

In the fall of 1911, Prime Minister Queshoff and his Russophile Cabinet realized that Bulgaria had nothing to gain from their efforts to negotiate with Turkey and from their refusal to come to an agreement with the other Balkan States.⁵ To effect this rapprochement Bulgaria had to abandon her policy in Macedonia. Negotiations between Bulgaria and Serbia were resumed, and with the blessing of Russia a treaty of alliance was signed on March 3, 1912. Upon Russia's demand a consideration of the alliance as an instrument to be used against Austrian expansion to the Balkans, and as a defensive agreement, was realized when a secret Annex was attached to this Treaty of Alliance in which it was made plain that Austria and Turkey were the powers against whom the document was directed.⁶ In this Annex, the territorial claims of Bulgaria and Serbia over Macedonia were defined, recognized, and settled. Bulgaria, abandoning Stamboloff's policy, agreed for the first time to the

3. Boghitchewitsch, ed., *Die Auswaertige Politik Serbiens 1903-1904*, i, No. 121, p.p 131-132. *British Documents*, ix, i, No. 120.

4. Sobranje is the Bulgarian Parliament.

5. Gueshoff, I.E., *The Balkan League*, p. 10.

6. Helmreich, E.C., *The Diplomacy of the Balkan Wars 1912 and 1913*, pp. 53-68; this is the most valuable work available on the relation of the Balkan States and the Great Powers.

partitioning of Macedonia, proposed long ago by Serbia and Greece. The Annex ⁷ further stipulated that the Emperor of Russia was to be the final arbitrator in the event of a disagreement between the two contracting parties, and that his decision in any dispute would be final. It was furthermore agreed that no offensive action was to be undertaken by the Allies without the expressed authorization of Russia.

Russia in bringing up the alliance between Bulgaria and Serbia had to pay a "secret loan of 3,000,000 golden francs from the coffer of Tsar Nicholas of Russia" to King Ferdinand for the signing of the Treaties. ⁸ Anyhow, this did not prevent Bulgaria to formulate a foreign policy jeopardizing Russian interests in Constantinople. ⁹

As far as Russian foreign policy is concerned, ¹⁰ the First Balkan War

7. For the text of the treaty, see Gueshoff, *op. cit.*, pp. 127-133. See also Gibbons, Venizelos, pp. 113-114.

8. Geshkoff, T.I., *Balkan Union*, 1940, p. 41.

9. *Ibid.*

10. For Russian foreign aspirations see in general the following collection of documents: France, Ministère des affaires étrangères, *Documents diplomatiques français, 1871-1914* (Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1926-1949), Series II, III.

Germany, Auswaertiges Amt, *Die grosse Politik der europaei-Kabinette, 1871-1914*; Sammlung der diplomatischen Akten des Auswaertigen Amtes, ed. by Johannes Lepsius, et al. (54 vols., Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft fuer Politik und Geschichte, Berlin, 1922-27).

Great Britain, Foreign Office, *British Documents on the Origin of the War, 1898-1914* ed. by George P. Gooch, et al. (11 vols., H.M. Stationary Office, London, 1930-35).

Marchand, René, *Un livre noir; diplomatie d'avant-guerre d'après les documents des archives russes, 1910-1917* (3 vols., Librairie du travail, Paris, 1922-27).

Russia, Ministerstvo inostrannykh diel, *Materiali po istorii franko-russkikh otnonshenie, 1910-1917*; sbornik sekretnikh-diplomaticheskikh dokumentov (Moskva, 1922).

Russia, Komissia po izdanii dokumentov epokhi imperializma, *Die internationalen Beziehungen im Zeitalter des Imperialismus*; Dokumente aus den Archiven der zarischen und provisorischen Regierung, German edition by Otto Hoetzsch (R. Hobbing, Berlin, 1931-42), Series I, II, III.

Russia, Ministerstvo inostrannykh diel, *Documents diplomatiques secrets russes, 1914-1917* d'après les archives du ministère des affaires étrangères a Petrograd; trans. by J. Polonsky (Payot, Paris, 1928).

Siebert, Benno A., *Graf Benckendorffs diplomatischer Schriftwechsel* (3 vols., W. de Gruyter & Co., Berlin, Leipzig, 1928).

Stieve, Friedrich, *Der diplomatische Schriftwechsel Iswolskis, 1911-1914* (4 vols., Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft fuer Politik und Geschichte, Berlin, 1926).

Stieve, Friedrich, *Iswolski im Weltkriege; der diplomatische Schriftwechsel Iswolskis aus den Jahren 1914-1917*; Neue Dokumente aus den Geheimakten des russischen Staatsarchiv (Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft fuer Politik und Geschichte, Berlin, 1926).

added the most dangerous factor of all—the possible occupation of Constantinople, the focus of all Russian dreams, by a foreign power. While she joyfully greeted the successes of the Balkan armies in Macedonia, she was terrified at the prospect of triumphant Bulgarian troops entering the city at the Straits. No matter how much Turkish defeats in the Balkans contributed to the realization of a Balkan federation under the aegis of Russia, Constantinople was not included in such a program. If Russia herself was not to be permitted to occupy it, Turkish rule was to be preferred above all others. Enthusiastic Balkan leaders mistakenly thought that they were carrying out Russia's wishes in advancing upon Adrianople, the fortress guarding the approaches to the Straits. Thus the Russian Minister to Serbia, Hartwig, was assured that "Constantinople would be captured" ... in order to deliver Tsargrad (the projected Russian name for Constantinople) to Russia, as a testimony of thanks for the countless sacrifices which the great emancipator, who had gathered together the related Slavic nations for an independent life, had expended."¹¹ Some of Russia's own Slavophiles lacked sufficient understanding of the government's finesse. One over-enthusiastic Russian politician had telegraphed to the Bulgarian Minister of the Interior and begged him to plant the cross on the *Hagia Sophia*, falsely informing him at the same time that Russia had decided to mobilize against Turkey.¹² Russia was thus caught between two conflicting interests. She had to support the Balkan nations in their struggle against Turkey, for fear of losing her hegemony over them, and yet she could under no circumstances acquiesce in the occupation of Constantinople by Bulgaria, and in this manner sacrifice the very instrument which she needed to make her overlordship over the Balkans something more than just an emotional sway.

When in October of 1911 the new Russian Ambassador to Turkey, Giers, advised his superiors to second the motion of Germany and other powers to send naval units to Constantinople, for the purpose of forcing Turkey to keep the Dardanelles and Bosphorus open, he likewise proposed that the Russian vessels should be more numerous than those of other nations and thereby be

11. Telegram of Hartwig to Sasanov, Oct. 29/16, 1912. Russia, Komissia po izdaniu dokumentov epokhi imperializma, *Die internationalen Beziehungen im Zeitalter des Imperialismus*; Documente aus den Archiven der zarischen und provisorischen Regierung, German edition by Otto Hoetzsch (R. Hobbing, Berlin, 1931-1942), Series III, vol. 4, part 1, no. 86, p. 92. Hereafter cited as Russia, *Internationale Beziehungen*.

12. Telegram of Nekliudov, Russian Minister in Sofia, to Sasanov, Oct. 29/16, 1912. Russia, *Internationale Beziehungen*, Ser. III, vol. 4, part 1, note 1 to no. 86, pp. 92-3.

able to intervene at the decisive moment.¹³ Thus, under the guise of acting in concert with other powers, Russia could either attempt to prevent a Bulgarian occupation of the city, or gain a predominant voice there if that could not be avoided. Sasanov agreed with Giers' suggestions. He ordered the fleet to be in complete readiness to assemble in the vicinity of the Bosphorus, from where it could be used to maintain order in the city and the security and the power of the Sultan.¹⁴

Repeatedly the Imperial Government emphasized to Great Britain and France that Constantinople was not included in her championship of the principle of "the Balkan countries for the Balkan peoples." Benckendorff again and again remarked to Grey that "Russia could not be enticed into any war which did not directly touch her vital interests. However, Constantinople represented a direct interest of Russia of primary importance, whose significance could not be modified in our eyes by any consideration of sympathy (for the Balkan nations)."¹⁵ The British Foreign Secretary was clearly warned by Benckendorff that a Bulgarian entrance into the Turkish capital would force Russia to make "an active demonstration." No matter what the cost, Russia could never accept the transfer of that city to a foreign power.¹⁶ The tendency of the British Government and public opinion to welcome the exclusion of Turkey from Europe and the surrender of Constantinople only added to the Russian concern.¹⁷ Grey strongly favored neutralization and the status of a free city for Constantinople. Benckendorff argued against such a solution, ostensibly on the ground that international, ethnological, religious, and geographical difficulties would make its execution impossible.¹⁸ While this was the reason officially advanced for a probable refusal to sanction the British suggestion, Benckendorff in a letter to Sasanov more nearly expressed the true Russian attitude. Russia, he wrote, must receive real guaranties which would secure the continued right of free passage through the Straits, some-

13. Telegram of Giers to Sasanov, Oct. 31/18, 1912. *Ibid.*, no. 107, p. 118.

14. Telegram of Sasanov to Giers, Nov. 2/Oct. 20, 1912. *ibid.*, no. 119, p. 130.

15. Letter of Benckendorff to Sasanov, Nov. 6/Oct. 24, 1912. Russia, *Internationale Beziehungen*, Ser. III, vol. 4, part 1, no. 164, p. 171.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

18. Telegram of Benckendorff to Sasanov, Nov. 7/Oct. 25, 1912. *Ibid.*, no. 173, pp. 183-4. Also telegram of Fleuriau, French chargé d'affaires in Great Britain, to Poincaré, French Foreign Minister, Nov. 6, 1912. France, *Documents diplomatiques*, Ser. III, vol. 4, no. 364, p. 381.

thing which could not be brought about by a mere amendment of the Treaty of Paris.¹⁹

Instead of agreeing to any commitments which could tie her hands in the future, Russia deemed it advisable to take steps to gain a recognition of her privileged position on the Straits after the conclusion of a peace treaty between Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire. Such a maneuver would have the effect of creating a recognized area of special Russian interests.²⁰ She did not believe that the other major powers would throw serious obstacles in her path. Turkey was weakened by the war and would hardly be in a position to resist the Russian pressure, and might even welcome it as a counterbalance to Bulgarian influence.²¹ When Poincaré suggested that in any peace treaty between the Allies and the Porte Constantinople should remain in the Sultan's hands, Sasanov hastened to express his enthusiastic agreement.²²

The imminent danger of a Bulgarian occupation of the capital of the Ottoman Empire gave rise to some basic formulations of the problem of the Straits among the higher echelons of the Russian Foreign Ministry. Taking for granted that the situation was critical and that it was one of the fundamental goals of Russia's foreign policy to satisfy the historic yearning for a free exit into the Mediterranean, it was incumbent upon her to ascertain the goal, to state the means required to accomplish the task, and to judge what portion of it could be fulfilled with the then available forces. Two memoranda of November 1912 give a clear expression of the final Russian aims, yet theoretical in nature and formulated independently of Russia's power status of the time, but vitally important as bases for her demands during World War I. One report was penned by anonymous members of the Ministry, but amended by Prince Trubetskoy, then chief of the Political Division, and later appointed as the prospective Russian governor of Tsargrad (Constantinople). The other summary was drawn up by Prince Lieven, the Chief of Staff of the Russian Admiralty. Although the two plans differ in the analysis of the means to be used to arrive at certain objectives, there is no disagreement on the final goal—the occupation of the whole Straits area and complete dominance over the Balkans.

19. Telegram of Benckendorff to Sasanov, Nov. 7/Oct. 25, 1912. Russia, *Internationale Beziehungen*, Ser. III, vol. 4, part 1, no. 173, p. 184. Also B.A. Siebert, *Benckendorffs Schriftwechsel*, II, no. 713, pp. 481-2.

20. Letter of Sasanov to Giers, Nov. 14/1, 1912. Russia, *Internationale Beziehungen* Ser. III, vol. 4, part 1, no. 246, p. 252.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Telegram of Georges Louis, French Ambassador to Russia, to Poincaré, Nov. 2, 1912. France, *Documents diplomatiques*, Ser. III, vol. 4, no. 311, p. 332.

It was confidently expected that Great Britain would renew her suggestion for international administration of Constantinople and the neutralization of the Straits, giving Russia the right to pass through the Straits in peacetime under certain conditions. This offer was extremely attractive because it entailed no financial expenditures on the part of Russia, nor would it have demanded a great strengthening of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. However, it could not be accepted because it did not adequately protect the Tsar's foremost interests.²³ Although neutralization would have given to Russia a certain sense of security in peacetime, complications in the international situation could place her in a worse situation than before, when Turkey still had at least some powers of resistance. In spite of any guaranties to the contrary, every nation's vessels could pass through the Straits in wartime. Neutralization would even facilitate an attempt by a potential enemy to seal Russia into the Black Sea.²⁴

The desire of Bulgaria for an exit to the Sea of Marmara was likewise in opposition to aims which the Imperial Government was determined not to renounce. The closeness of Bulgaria to Constantinople would enable her to take that city at will, with no international agreements being able to prevent such a quick *fait accompli*. "No international guaranties," writes Trubetzkoy, "which are not supported by real might, are capable of securing the Straits, unless they are protected from enemy occupation from land and sea."²⁵

Beyond the purely military and political aspects of the question, the economic side also demanded much Russian attention. Prince Lieven pointed out that the richest parts of Russia found their natural outlet in the Black Sea. The important roads and rivers wound their way into its ports which already in 1910 carried 43.3 percent of Russian exports. Expecting that this trade would increase manifold as the areas of Central and Eastern Russia were further developed, he believed that in such a position the security of the connection of the Black Sea with the outside world was a question of the greatest importance for the free evolution of the Empire.²⁶

Both reports agree that in view of the military, political, ideological, and

23. Memorandum drafted in the Russian Foreign Ministry, as amended by Prince Trubetzkoy, Nov. 12, 1912. Russia, *Internationale Beziehungen*, Ser. III, vol. 4, part 1, no. 227, pp. 232-3.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 233.

25. Memorandum of Russian Foreign Ministry, amended by Trubetzkoy, Nov. 12/Oct. 30, 1912. Russia, *Internationale Beziehungen*, Ser. III, vol. 4, part 1, no. 227, O. 233.

26. Memorandum of Prince Lieven, Chief of Staff of the Admiralty, to Grigorovich, Russian Navy Minister, Nov. 28/15, 1912. *Ibid.*, no. 374, p. 365.

economic importance of the Straits to Russia, the most radical, but at the historically necessary solution, would be the occupation of Constantinople plus a neighboring protective zone.²⁷ Russia would then dominate one of the centers of world trade and the key to the Mediterranean. Strategically, she would gain a short land frontier with Bulgaria, with the possibility of making Tshadaldsha (the European part of Turkey) an impregnable wall. The natural position of the Dardanelles, which are also capable of complete fortification, would further assist in developing a previously undreamed of flowering of Russian power.²⁸ "In one word: a world situation would evolve for Russia which would be the natural crowning of her exertions and sacrifices in the course of two centuries of (her) history." The authors of the memorandum even managed to connect this question with the Empire's internal state. They firmly believed that the scope of the task ahead and the uncounted benefits of its fulfillment would bring health to the tortured body of Russian domestic life, and would give the needed impetus which could bring about the unity of government and people, all in the service of a labor of national significance.²⁹

While Trubetzkoy and his assistants were just as much concerned with the defense of the Black Sea as with the offensive potentialities accruing to the ruler of Constantinople, Lieven relegated the former into a category of secondary importance, not vital, and easily solved in other ways. The primary task was the domination of the Straits as an exit into the Mediterranean.³⁰ Inasmuch as Russia's approach to that sea could easily be blocked in the Aegean as well as at the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, to gain satisfactory domination of the waterways Russia must not only rule the sea, but also all the islands of the Greek Archipelago, including Crete, Asia Minor, and the Balkan Peninsula. However, none of these aims are possible of accomplishment unless Russia rules the Black Sea and the Aegean Sea by means of a first class fleet.³¹

Lieven is quite aware of the fact that such a complete solution was beyond the contemporary strength of his country, and would remain a difficult task in the future. If at all, it could only be realized through the united efforts of

27. Memo. of Russian Foreign Ministry, amended by Trubetzkoy, Nov. 12/Oct. 30, 1912. *Ibid.*, no. 227, p. 233.

28. Memo. of Russian Foreign Ministry, amended by Trubetzkoy, Nov. 12/Oct. 30, 1912. Russia, *Internationale Beziehungen*, Ser. III, vol 4, part 1, no. 227, p. 234.

29. *Ibid.*

30. Memo. of Lieven to Grigorovich, Nov. 28/15, 1912. *Ibid.*, no. 374, p. 365.

31. Memo. of Lieven to Grigorovich, Nov. 28/15, 1912. Russia, *Internationale Beziehungen*, Ser. III, vol 4, part 1, no. 374, p. 365.

the Slav nations, all acting under a previously prepared, unified plan.³² Unfortunately, Russia was in danger of being caught up in a vicious circle by the reality that to maintain permanent leadership among the Balkan countries she had to possess the Straits. The Chief of Staff of the Navy therefore comes to the conclusion that "...no matter from what standpoint one considers.... this question, the unconditional demand grows that (Russia) build up (her) sovereign authority over the waters of the Bosphorus, the Sea of Marmara, the Straits of the Dardanelles, and the Aegean Sea."³³ Trubetzkoy, being less concerned with purely military matters and more with the over-all world position and distribution of power, agreed with these ultimate goals, but at the same time was more wary of becoming overly bold. He underlined the fact that the occupation of Constantinople at that moment would be the signal for the wholesale seizure of territories by the other great European nations. As a result, it would become impossible to maintain the principle of the "Balkans for the Balkan peoples" which constituted one of the main aims of Russian policy. This Russian hegemony over her Slavic brother nations could not be sacrificed even for the sake of Constantinople, as long as she required them as strong buffers and supports against any plans of the Central Powers. A premature Russian occupation of the Turkish capital could easily bring about an Austrian annexation of the western half of the Balkan Peninsula, the loss of Serbia, and therefore the end of the dream of Balkan unity. Whatever might be her desires, a formulation of the problem which encompassed the immediate Russian incorporation of Constantinople was therefore clearly out of the question.³⁴

Since Russia must temporarily renounce the radical solution, Trubetzkoy urges that she presently confine herself to an expression of the question which could serve as steps for the future. Therefore, she must be constantly on the watch that she enter into no agreements which could prejudice her future pretensions. That means the prevention of all guaranties of an international character which could hamper her freedom of action and necessitate a consideration of the rights of other nations.³⁵ The measures which could perhaps be taken short of seizure of Constantinople, which would nevertheless place no obstacles in the path of future Russian action, would be the occupation of the

32. *Ibid.*, p. 366.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Memo. of Russian Foreign Ministry, amended by Trubetzkoy, Nov. 12/Oct. 30, 1912. Russia, *Internationale Beziehungen*, Ser. III, vol. 4, part 1, no. 227, p. 235.

35. *Ibid.*

upper Bosphorus by lease or outright cession, with Constantinople remaining if possible in Turkish hands or at worst assuming an international character. The Dardanelles could then be neutralized if necessary, with the fortifications on both shores razed to the ground. With the upper Bosphorus as a powerful point of support, the entrance to the Black Sea could easily be blocked and the neutralized Straits could not prevent the passage of a dominant Russian fleet. Such temporary actions would not represent a full solution of the problem of the Straits, but they would constitute steps toward a final realization of one of the main aims which Russia inherited from the past and would correspond to the present natural growth of Russian capabilities and strength.³⁶

Prince Lieven, the military planner, could not entirely go along with these alternatives. While the Foreign Ministry was much concerned with problems of defense, Lieven deemed the proposed lodgement on both shores of the Bosphorus useless in fulfilling the basic task, the ensuring of a free exit from the Black Sea. Such an action would absorb prodigious amounts of men, money, and materials and yet not assure the continued possession of the area. Likewise, the navy would be fruitlessly tied down in that region, prey to attacks from all directions, yet unable to desert the exposed position. To Prince Lieven the whole matter was a nothing or all proposition. "Either we appropriate the whole territory which separates us from (the shores of the Straits)," he remarks "or nothing. A cut-off fragment on both sides (of the Straits) would only become a source of needless worries and weakness, as was the case in the previous war with Port Arthur."³⁷ He also points out that if Russia were given the right to occupy and fortify the upper Bosphorus, this privilege would only assist in fulfilling the secondary task of defending the Black Sea, and would give an opportunity to other powers to gain the same rights.³⁸ Likewise, if the *status quo* were maintained, with the modification that the Russian fleet could freely navigate the Straits, Russia's position would not be improved in any way. War vessels could not utilize this right for fear of being cut off from their bases by the fortifications constructed on the shores.³⁹ In view of these considerations Prince Lieven draws up a temporary plan of action which exhibits a different emphasis than the one penned by officials of the Foreign Minis-

36. Memo. of Foreign Ministry, amended by Trubetzkoy, Nov. 12/Oct. 30, 1912. Russia, *Internationale Beziehungen*, Ser. III, vol. 4, part 1, no. 227, p. 235.

37. Memo. of Lieven to Grigorovich, Nov. 28/15, 1912. Russia, *Internationale Beziehungen*, Ser. III, vol. 4, part 1, no. 374, p. 366.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 368.

39. *Ibid.*

try.⁴⁰ The Chief of Staff of the Navy bases all his projects on the existence of a superior Russian fleet. The very threat of its being could assist in the winning of complete freedom of shipping through the Straits by diplomatic means. The latter could then be employed to foist an obligation on the Sultan to destroy all fortifications in the Straits, in addition to a promise to erect no new fortresses. Finally, Russia would then be in a position to demand the rights of anchorage and the creation of coaling stations for the fleet at several points in the Straits and the Sea of Marmara.⁴¹ The way would then be completely free for the final absorption of the whole region whenever conditions were ripe for this final crowning achievement. Although these memoranda never found actual application, they have been treated in such detail because they furnish a reliable index to Russia's most hallowed dreams and aspirations. They constitute striking parallels to the demands submitted by Russia when the First World War promised to end in their realization.

Now let us return once more from the province of planning, to the actual conditions as they motivated Russian behavior during the First Balkan War. Although she had previously completely opposed a Bulgarian entrance into Constantinople, by November 7, 1912 she had resigned herself to its inevitability. Great Britain and France were informed that no opposition would be offered to it as long as the stay was purely provisional.⁴² If the negotiations then going on between Bulgaria and Turkey had failed, and the Balkan Allies threatened to occupy the city, the Imperial Government would have been prepared to dispatch troops into Constantinople while invaders were still before the gates. In this way Russia could have posed as the protector of the European colony and the Christians. More importantly, the presence of her troops would have created a real security that in the further decisions on the city's fate Russia would have the deciding voice.⁴³ Taking into consideration Trubetzkoy's memorandum, Sasanov suggested that the time would then come when Russia would have to choose whether she was going to lodge herself on the upper shores of the Bosphorus.⁴⁴ However, the Foreign Minister added that "no paper guaranties are sufficient, and therefore it would be very diffi-

40. See pp. 25-26 above.

41. Memo. of Lieven to Grigorovich, Nov. 28/15, 1912. Russia, *Internationale Beziehungen*, Ser. III, vol. 4, part 1, no. 374, pp. 367-8.

42. Telegram of Poincaré to Cambon, French Ambassador in London, Nov. 8, 1912. France, *Documents diplomatiques*, Ser. III, vol. 4, no. 389, pp. 408-9.

43. Letter of Sasanov to Giers, Russian Ambassador to Turkey, Nov. 14/1, 1912. Russia, *Internationale Beziehungen*, Ser. III, vol. 4, part 1, no. 246, p. 253.

44. *Ibid.*

cult for us to be content with such (paper guaranties)."⁴⁵ By November 20, Sasanov had become so desperate and fearful of the consequences of a Bulgarian occupation of the Turkish capital that he informed the French Ambassador that Russia would soon raise the issue of the future of the Straits, and most surprising of all, with the neutralization of Constantinople as its basis.⁴⁶ By November 25 the crisis had diminished considerably. Before the other powers had even an opportunity to consider Sasanov's amazing suggestions, the latter dropped the plan as hastily as he had proposed it. Instead, he advised a return to the position of October, 1908, with the Black Sea powers alone enjoying rights of passage for their war vessels.⁴⁷ When the French Government requested information of Russian intentions,⁴⁸ Isvolsky replied in the same vein, adding that he saw no reason to raise the question at the moment. He believed that the conditions were ripe for the adoption of Sasanov's suggestion, but announced that Russia would not argue the point since she feared that others would accuse her of wishing to play the game of compensation. However, she expected French support if she wanted to do so in the future.⁴⁹ It was probably more due to Benckendorff's advice than to a fear of being accused of compensatory tactics that Sasanov decided to defer the discussion of the Straits Question. The former had strongly counseled his chief that Russia must maintain a fiction of disinterestedness and thus keep Great Britain on her side as a supporter in any future war with Germany and Austria-Hungary. In consequence, she must avoid being involved in all questions, such as that of the Straits, which might cause the stigma of an aggressor to be attached to her.⁵⁰

By the end of November the Russian Government had regained its courage to a sufficient extent to make new tentative stabs in the Straits Question possible. Sasanov wrote to Isvolsky that doubt in the final outcome of the struggle between the Ottoman Empire and the Balkan states had made her maintain a certain reticence toward the British proposals for the possible neutralization of Constantinople and new international guaranties for the affected area. He once more underscored the Russian contention that her interests

45. *Ibid.*, p. 254.

46. Dispatch of Louis, French Ambassador to Russia, to Poincaré, Nov. 20, 1912. France, *Documents diplomatiques*, Ser. III, vol. 4, no. 506, p. 513.

47. Telegram of Louis to Poincaré, Nov. 25, 1912. France, *Documents diplomatiques*, Ser. III, vol. 4, no. 559, pp. 557-8.

48. Telegram of Poincaré to Louis Nov. 26, 1912. *Ibid.*, no. 568, p. 567.

49. Letter of Isvolsky to Poincaré, Dec. 3, 1912. *Ibid.*, no. 617, p. 636.

50. Letter of Benckendorff to Sasanov, Nov. 7/20, 1912. B.A. Siebert, *Benckendorffs Schriftwechsel*, II, no. 724, pp. 494-5.

could scarcely be safeguarded solely by judicial promises and restraints which could always be violated, but must rather place her trust in real power which could protect the provisions of any agreed statute from possible damage.⁵¹ The proposition of Austria to give her a free hand in the western part of the Balkan Peninsula in return for her acquiescence in Russia freedom of action in Constantinople was discussed with even greater reticence in St Petersburg.⁵² Instead of subscribing to either of these limiting proposals, Sasanov alludes to the weakened status of Turkey, adding that the latter must depend to an ever greater extent on Russia's goodwill toward her.⁵³ Although there was presently no question of a bilateral agreement with the Porte, since such a step would run counter to her Balkan policy, Sasanov reminds Isvolsky that since Turkey had been forced to denude her frontier facing Russia of troops, the necessary powers of persuasion are present in the form of Russian soldiers in the Caucasus.⁵⁴ He believed that the ground had been well prepared during the course of the previous few years for some kind of action. Russian desires were no longer news to any European government, and all had expressed qualified approval.⁵⁵ Even Benckendorff was of the opinion that Great Britain would support Russia if the question of the Straits were raised in a manner appreciative of the then current world situation. In spite of this expected British approval, he strongly opposed Sasanov's plan as outlined to Isvolsky, claiming that Russia would be in danger of losing a great part of the moral influence which she had won by her hands-off attitude during the First Balkan War. Above all, the door would be opened to the theory of compensation, which was most dangerous to Russian interests in the Balkans.⁵⁶ After Poincaré had also expressed his fear that other powers would view the Russian formula with disapproval,⁵⁷ Isvolsky informed him that his government had decided to

51. Letter of Sasanov to Isvolsky, Nov. 28/15, 1912. Russia, *Internationale Beziehungen*, Ser. III, vol. 4, part 1, no. 368, p. 355. Also F. Stieve, *Iswolskys Schriftwechsel*, II, no. 593, pp. 364-5.

52. *Ibid.*, *Internationale Beziehungen*, pp. 355-6; *Iswolskys Schriftwechsel*, p. 365.

53. Letter of Sasanov to Isvolsky, Nov. 15/28, 1912. F. Stieve, *Iswolskys Schriftwechsel*, II, no. 593, p. 366. Also Russia, *Internationale Beziehungen*, Ser. III, vol. 4, part 1, no. 368, p. 356.

54. Letter of Sasanov to Isvolsky, Nov. 28/15, 1912. Russia, *Internationale Beziehungen*, Ser. III, vol. 4, part 1, no. 368, p. 356.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 357.

56. Letter of Benckendorff to Sasanov, Nov. 20/Dec. 2, 1912.

57. Telegram of Isvolsky to Sasanov, Dec. 3/Nov. 20, 1912. Russia, *Internationale Beziehungen*, Ser. III, vol. 4, part 1, note 1 to no. 368, p. 357.

adopt a waiting attitude in the matter.⁵⁸ Once more Russia was forced to beat a hasty retreat.

Since Russia was unable to advance her interests in the face of determined opposition by Great Britain and even France, she adopted the next best course the championship of the *status quo*. Benckendorff eagerly seconded a French motion at the London Peace Conference regarding Constantinople. The resolution called for the maintenance of the *status quo*, the continued possession of the city by the Ottoman Empire, as well as further Turkish rule over the territories bordering the Sea of Marmara and the Dardanelles.⁵⁹ In March of 1913 the Russian Fleet was once more ordered to be in a state of readiness to embark for the Straits "for the protection of the peaceful Christian population of Constantinople during the disorders of the Turkish retreat" and more importantly, to stand by to prevent an unfavorable solution of the Straits Question when the Bulgarians entered the Turkish capital, as was again expected.⁶⁰ The Russian Ambassador Giers was authorized to call the fleet to Constantinople whenever circumstances demanded it.⁶¹ Bulgaria, for her part, was warned that she could only receive war compensation from Turkey if the hostilities threatening the city were ended at once. Furthermore, any demand for an opening on the Sea of Marmara would immensely prejudice Bulgaria's other claims in the division of the conquered territories.⁶²

Considering the gravity of the situation and the great dangers which had threatened her vital interests, Russia could congratulate herself that she had managed to escape unharmed from the Balkan embroglio. She had been prepared to take decisive action, yet always shied from the risks. At any rate, the promise of a continuation of pre-war conditions, while not advancing her aims, nevertheless saved them unharmed for another, more auspicious day.

When Britain in late April, 1913, submitted proposals for the supervision of Turkish finances for the purpose of diverting funds from armaments to more productive uses, the Russian Government raised the question of the effect of such a move on Turkey's ability to protect the Straits and Constantinople. Any lessening would be of serious concern to Russia since it would represent

58. Telegram of Isvolsky to Sasanov, Dec. 6/Nov. 23, 1912. *Ibid.*, note 1 to no. 368, p. 357.

59. Telegram of Benckendorff to Sasanov, Dec. 5/18, 1912. B.A. Siebert, *Benckendorffs Schriftwechsel*, II, no. 768, p. 544.

60. Telegram of Sasanov to Giers, March 17/30, 1913. *Ibid.*, III, no. 927, p. 148.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 148. Also telegram of Sasanov to Benckendorff, March 17/30, 1913. *Ibid.*, no. 928, pp. 148-9.

62. Telegram of Sasanov to Benckendorff, March 18/31, 1913. *Ibid.*, no. 807, p. 112.

a constant temptation to Bulgaria to grab a defenseless Constantinople.⁶³ It was against Russian plans to weaken Turkey still further, especially since the prospects were good that closer relations would develop their common interest in preventing the domination of the Straits by a foreign power. Therefore, Russia opposed a multi-powered financial control, of which she constituted only one part, and to whose decisions she was bound.⁶⁴ Giers expressed himself in a similar vein. "The introduction of an international element into our heretofore direct relations with Turkey can only prevent and delay our historic striving for the possession of the Straits." Instead, he favored the temporary establishment of sufficient order in Turkey so as to safeguard the personal and material security of the inhabitants, without regard to religion or nationality. This would permit Russia to delay the final liquidation of the problem until such time as her participation would promise the greatest rewards.⁶⁵

Sasanov summed up the task in a memorandum presented to Tsar Nicholas II on December 6, 1913. The changed circumstances resulting from the Balkan Wars, he wrote, faced Russia with a very involved and difficult assignment. It was not in her immediate interest to strive for any territorial gains. Above all, she needed peace for a continued, healthy internal evolution. Nevertheless, she had to secure her rights and interests in advance, peace not being solely dependent on Russia. The flow of events might force her to take up arms.⁶⁶ In spite of her desire for peace, doubts in the ability of Turkey to continue to exist underlined the importance of the Straits to Russia in both political and economic terms. The Foreign Minister admitted the existence of different opinions regarding the feasibility of a Russian occupation of the Straits. Taking into consideration the sacrifices demanded by such a task and the value of their possession, conflicting arguments were sure to arise. However, he warns his sovereign that the orientation of Russian foreign policy in so vital a question must be built on a generally accepted basis, not subject to partisan disagreements.⁶⁷

63. Very confidential letter of Sasanov to Benckendorff, April 18/May 1, 1913, B.A. Siebert, *Benckendorffs Schriftwechsel*, III, no. 182, pp. 182-9.

64. *Ibid.*

65. Telegram of Giers to Sasanov, April 27/May 10, 1913. B.A. Siebert, *Benckendorffs Schriftwechsel*, III, no. 962, p. 190.

66. Report of Sasanov to Nicholas II, Nov. 23/Dec. 6, 1913. F. Stieve, *Iswolskys Schriftwechsel*, III, no. 1157, pp. 374-6.

67. Report of Sasanov to Nicholas II, Nov. 23/Dec. 6, 1913. F. Stieve, *Iswolskys Schriftwechsel*, III, no. 1157, p. 376.

The Balkan Wars have made the problem more involved than ever. The losses in trade occasioned by the closing of the Straits had made it clear that the economic value of this waterway was even greater than had formerly been supposed. On the other hand, the political and strategic difficulties standing in the way of a capture of the Straits had increased. Only one statement could be made with certainty: No Russian statesman could regard developments in that area as a neutral.⁶⁸ The protection of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus by the Ottoman Empire was presently sufficient for Russian needs. Turkey was neither too strong nor too weak. She could not threaten her neighbor, rather being forced to take serious consideration of her. Even the intolerance manifested by the Moslem government was favorable to Russia since it caused the subject, orthodox peoples to gravitate toward the Russian orbit.⁶⁹

Of course this willingness to support Turkish rule for the time being did not in any way imply that Russia would permit any other state to dominate the passage. This would be equivalent to subjecting the whole economic development of Russia to this foreign nation. "He who possesses the Straits," he adds, "not only holds the key to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean in his hand, but likewise will possess the key for the break-through into Asia Minor and the dominance over the Balkan nations."⁷⁰ Here we have another expression of an oft-repeated theme. A neutralization of the territory is only slightly less odious. If Russia assented to such a course, she still would have to strengthen her military and naval forces in the Black Sea in order to be ready to occupy the Straits at a moment's notice, before any other power could reach that spot.

Already in 1895, at the time of the Armenian massacres, Russia had wanted to set foot in Constantinople. Unfortunately, she was forced to drop the plan when a lack of transport and inefficient mobilization made its realization impossible. Since that time, complains Sasanov, the Imperial Government has spent hundreds of millions of rubles on the construction of warships and a merchant fleet, yet had not come nearer to her goals. Whenever the suggestion of a landing operation came up, the government became fearful because its execution was deemed almost impossible.⁷¹ An added worry to the Foreign Minister was the growth of the Turkish Fleet, which threatened to surpass the Russian Black Sea squadrons in the quality of its ships and the strength of its guns. Such a situation was plainly unacceptable. "Russia", he

68. *Ibid.*

69. *Ibid.*

70. Report of Sasanov to Nicholas II, Nov. 23/Dec. 6, 1913. F. Stieve, *Iswolskys Schriftwechsel*, III, no. 1157, pp. 376-7.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 379.

remarked, "cannot either now suffer the superiority of Turkey on the sea, nor remain indifferent in the future to the solution of the Straits Question." It was therefore incumbent upon her to clear the decks for action, since she could not foretell when the crisis could become acute. He urged the drawing up of a plan, minute to the smallest detail.⁷² Since the training of the Turkish Fleet was under the direction of British officers, Benckendorff was instructed to urge the British Government to handle this delicate matter in such a manner that the fleet under the command of her officers would do no more than keep pace with the Russian Black Sea Fleet.⁷³ In connection with these efforts, Russia succeeded in March, 1914, in inducing the Argentine Government not to sell two cruisers to the Porte, as had previously been planned.⁷⁴ Taking all the above factors into account, Sasanov reasoned that the early dissolution of the Ottoman Empire was not desirable. It was Russia's duty to do her utmost in the diplomatic field to delay such an event. In the meantime, she had to strengthen her fleet and landing corps to such an extent as to enable them to force the Straits and carry out their temporary or permanent occupation.⁷⁵

On February 8, 1914 Sasanov convoked a special conference of all the ministers and the heads of the armed forces for the purpose of drawing up a preliminary plan on the lines outlined to the Tsar.⁷⁶ During the discussion he reiterated his contention that if, in the course of events, the Straits were lost to Turkey, Russia could under no circumstances permit another power to occupy those shores. It was therefore absolutely necessary that a program for such an eventuality be at hand.⁷⁷ In any plan of action, the Aegean Islands were of paramount importance. It is therefore not surprising that the Imperial Government was very concerned in the early months of 1914 that Samothrace and especially Lemnos did not pass into the hands of Greece, as the latter demanded as war compensation from Turkey.⁷⁸ In June, 1914, the Russian military attaché in Turkey was sent on an inspection trip through the Dardan-

72. Report of Sasanov to Nicholas II, Nov. 23/Dec. 6, 1913. F. Stieve, *Iswolskys Schriftwechsel*, III, no. 1157, p. 380.

73. Letter of Sasanov to Benckendorff, May 8/April 25, 1914. Russia, *Internationale Beziehungen*, Ser. I, vol. 2, no. 384, pp. 381-2.

74. Letter of Bachmatiev, Russian envoy in the U.S., to Sasanov, March 14/1, 1914. *Ibid.*, no. 11, p. 8.

75. Report of Sasanov to Nicholas II, Nov. 23/Dec. 6, 1913. F. Stieve, *Iswolskys Schriftwechsel*, III, no. 1157, p. 380.

76. Journal of Special Conference, Feb. 21/8, 1914. Russia, *Internationale Beziehungen*, Ser. I, vol. 1, no. 295, p. 283.

77. *Ibid.*

78. Letter of Grigorovich, Minister of the Navy, to Sasanov, Dec. 18/5, 1913. *Ibid.*, note 2, p. 1. Also report of Sasanov to Nicholas II, Jan. 18/5, 1914. *Ibid.*, no. 41, p. 36.

elles, the Bosphorus, and the Aegean Islands. The essence of his report stated that the islands of Tenedos, Imbros, and Lemnos were vital to the defense of the Straits. Their cession to Greece would expose the waterway to constant attacks. Unless Russia had given up hope of sooner or later setting foot in the Straits area, such a cession would clearly be against Russia's interests.⁷⁹ Finally, by the beginning of the First World War the project for a landing near Constantinople, as envisaged by Sasanov, had taken shape.⁸⁰ It was only due to the unexpected demands levied upon Russia on the western front that the realization of the plan never saw the light of day.

In the months preceding the outbreak of the war, it had also become evident to the Imperial Government that Germany had entered upon a race with Russia for control of the sympathies of the Sultan and his ministers. Nicholas II interpreted the dispatch of the General Liman von Sanders mission as an attempt on Germany's part to imprison Russia in the Black Sea. However, he intimated that Russia would resist such a policy with all her might, even if it meant war.⁸¹ Sasanov informed the British Ambassador that his nation would never take any aggressive action against Turkey, as long as that country remained an independent state. On the other hand, if Germany succeeded in turning the Ottoman Empire into a vassal protectorate, Russia would be forced to act, inasmuch as she could never permit Turkey to become the dependency of another power.⁸²

When we regard the years 1908-1914 in retrospect, it is quite evident that they were singularly unproductive years, as far as Russian goals in the Straits area are concerned. In spite of the promises of support extracted from reluctant governments, in spite of the money expended and the plans made and discarded, the glorious goal still seemed far out of sight. Russia had always been ready to fish in troubled waters, but unfortunately, two fishes—Constantinople and the Balkans—always wished to bite. She could not make up her mind to hook the one, for fear of losing the other.

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79. Dispatch of Giers to Sasanov, June 10/May 28, 1914. *Ibid.*, vol. 3, note 1 to no. 200, pp. 184-5.

80. Secret report of Suchomlinov, Russian Minister of War, to Sasanov, June 25/12, 1914. Russia, *Internationale Beziehungen*, Ser. I, vol. 3, no. 374, pp. 323-4.

81. Letter of Buchanan to Grey, April 3, 1914. Great Britain, Foreign Office, *British Documents on the Origin of the War, 1898-1914*, ed. by George P. Gooch, et al. (11 vols., H.M. Stationary Office, London, 1930-35), vol. 10, part 2, no. 537, p. 781. Hereafter cited as Great Britain, *British Documents*.

82. *Ibid.*, p. 782.