

Empires in Conflict: Armenia and the Great Powers, 1895–1920

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Imperial Russian interests and the Armenian Question during 1914-16

The government as well as consistent desire of the Russian government to acquire Constantinople and the Straits was traditional, as was Franco-British resistance to it. The Russian Empire, whose ports were blocked by ice for much of the year, regarded the Straits as a commercial lifeline. The Dardanelles and the Bosphorus were vital to the economic recovery she was waged against the Ottoman Empire with the goal of avenging the Straits had failed to meet Franco-Russian expectations. The opposition, led by Britain and France, was motivated primarily to maintain the integrity of the Ottoman Empire and to hinder it up to a point, Turkey served as an effective buffer against Russian expansion and influence. Although the Russian government had shown no desire to the economy and finance of the Ottoman Empire, the possession of the Straits constituted the 'key and gate to the Russian house', which gave access to the Mediterranean for Russian commerce. It also formed a natural point for the exercise of powerful political influence in the Balkans.

Russian export and import goods comprised about half of all Russian exports, and between 15 and 20 per cent of all Russian goods went through the Straits. The total blockade of the Straits in 1915-16, during the First Turkish war, had resulted in great Russian economic losses. The second closure, during the Balkan wars of 1913-14, was even more serious. Therefore, the healthy economy of Russia's economy was at constant risk. Solving the problem became the defining aim of Russian foreign policy.

With the outbreak of the First World War, Russia found herself in a position where she could finally realise her cherished territorial ambitions. Her strategic interests in the Ottoman Empire hinged on two specific military targets: command of the

Black Sea, with a minimum goal of defending Russia's coasts and a maximum of seizure of the Straits, and the annexation of parts of Turkish Armenia which were of strategic importance, such as Trebizond, Erzerum, Bitlis and Van.

In a review of the Armenian affairs question, Russian Turkish relations had been treated in a serious manner. But in May 1914 Talaat Pasha, leading the armed Ottoman movement east to Leningrad, the Tsar's summer palace in the Crimea, proposed an alliance with Russia. According to Talaat Pasha, it was in Turkey's interest to cultivate the 'best possible relations'. During the conversation Talaat also made it clear that Turkey could count upon Russia's friendship, only provided that she continued 'business as her own house', and did not allow any other power to share with her the control of the Straits. Russia's response was favourable, and stressed that her government wished to see 'Turkey for the Turk', but would not interfere in foreign powers regarding a privileged position. Touching on the Armenian Question, the Russian Foreign Minister expressed the hope that the Ottoman government would treat the Armenian people as a 'just' and 'friendly' agent. Talaat gave satisfactory assurances on all the points discussed, and concluded that the Ottoman military situation would not be allowed to exceed the limits suggested to it, which were of a 'purely technical character'. Despite the good impression that Talaat had made and the fact that he had once been decorated with the Order of Alexander Nevski, the offer of the alliance between the two countries was left open by Russia.

The unexpected change of attitude on the part of the Russian government towards the Ottoman Empire suggests that Russia had a definite objective in view. It had always been one of the principal objectives of Russian policy to secure modification of the restrictions imposed upon her warships passing through the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. The large increase of control exercised by Germany over the Ottoman army and the substantial increase of Ottoman naval power were to have been the factors inducing the Russian government to follow a moderate and friendly line of policy. Since the Russian movement had failed in being the expected ally and the armed intervention of Russia in Anatolia, the policy of a friendly attitude was believed to be desirable, at least for the moment.

Enver Pasha, the Constantinople Minister of War who had been the chief negotiator on the Turkish side in negotiating the alliance with Germany, moved with the idea of a Russian alliance. He reported Talaat's proposition to Giers, the Russian ambassador in Constantinople.