

THE CONSTANTINOPLE AGREEMENT*

4 March—10 April 1915 •

[The wartime secret arrangements among the Entente powers for the partition of the Ottoman Empire comprised essentially four sets of undertakings : the Constantinople agreement, the London agreement (26 April 1915), the Sykes-Picot agreement (April-October 1916) and the Saint-Jean de Maurienne agreement (April-August 1917). The so-called Constantinople agreement was not drawn up as a single instrument. It consisted, instead, of diplomatic exchanges between Russia, Britain, and France over a period of five weeks . . . While not all of the documents concerned have been reproduced below, those selected present the essential elements of the tripartite undertaking.]

1. *Aide-Memoire* FROM RUSSIAN FOREIGN MINISTER TO BRITISH AND FRENCH AMBASSADORS AT PETROGRAD, 19 FEBRUARY/4 MARCH 1915.¹

The course of recent events leads His Majesty Emperor Nicholas to think that the question of Constantinople and of the Straits must be definitively solved, according to the time-honored aspirations of Russia.

Every solution will be inadequate and precarious if the city of Constantinople, the western bank of the Bosphorus, of the Sea of Marmara and of the Dardanelles, as well as southern Thrace to the Enez-Midyé line, should henceforth not be incorporated into the Russian Empire.

Similarly, and by strategic necessity, that part of the Asiatic shore that lies between the Bosphorus, the Sakarya River and a point to be determined on the Gulf of Izmit, and the islands of

* Reproduced from Hurewitz, *Diplomacy in the Near and Middle East : A Documentary Record, 1914-1956*, Vol. II, 1956, pp. 7-11.

1. Translated from the French text in E.L. Woodward and R. Butler, eds., *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939* (London, 1952), 1st ser., vol. 4, pp. 635-36.

the Sea of Marmara, the Imbros Islands and the Tenedos Islands must be incorporated into the (Russian) Empire.

The special interests of France and of Great Britain in the above region will be scrupulously respected.

The Imperial Government entertains the hope that the above considerations will be sympathetically received by the two Allied Governments. The said Allied Governments are assured similar understanding on the part of the Imperial Government for the realization of plans which they may frame with reference to other regions of the Ottoman Empire or elsewhere.

2. BRITISH *Aide-Memoire* TO THE RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT,
27 FEBRUARY/12 MARCH 1915¹

Subject to the war being carried on and brought to a successful conclusion, and to the desiderata of Great Britain and France in the Ottoman Empire and elsewhere being realised, as indicated in the Russian communication herein referred to, His Majesty's Government will agree to the Russian Government's *aide-memoire* relative to Constantinople and the Straits, the text of which was communicated to His Britannic Majesty's Ambassador by his Excellency M. Sazonof on February 19th/March 4th instant.

3. BRITISH MEMORANDUM TO THE RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT,
27 FEBRUARY/12 MARCH 1915²

His Majesty's Ambassador has been instructed to make the following observations with reference to the *aide-memoire* which this Embassy had the honour of addressing to the Imperial Government on February 27/March 12, 1915.

The claim made by the Imperial Government in their *aide-memoire* of February 19/March 4, 1915, considerably exceeds the desiderata which were foreshadowed by M. Sazonof as probable a few weeks ago. Before His Majesty's Government have had time to take into consideration what their own desiderata elsewhere would be in the final terms of peace, Russia is asking for a definite promise that her wishes shall be satisfied with regard to what is in fact the richest prize of the entire war. Sir Edward Grey accordingly hopes that M. Sazonof will realise that it is not in the power of His Majesty's Government to give a greater proof of friendship than that which is afforded by the terms of the above-mentioned *aide-memoire*.

1. Woodward and Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 636.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 636-38.

That document involves a complete reversal of the traditional policy of His Majesty's Government, and is in direct opposition to the opinions and sentiments at one time universally held in England and which have still by no means died out. Sir Edward Grey therefore trusts that the Imperial Government will recognise that the recent general assurances given to M. Sazonof have been most loyally and amply fulfilled. In presenting the *aide-memoire* now, His Majesty's Government believe and hope that a lasting friendship between Russia and Great Britain will be assured as soon as the proposed settlement is realised.

From the British *aide-memoire* it follows that the desiderata of His Majesty's Government, however important they may be to British interests in other parts of the world, will contain no condition which could impair Russia's control over the territories described in the Russian *aide-memoire* of February 19/March 4, 1915.

In view of the fact that Constantinople will always remain a trade *entrepot* for South-Eastern Europe and Asia Minor, His Majesty's Government will ask that Russia shall, when she comes into possession of it, arrange for a free port for goods in transit to and from non-Russian territory. His Majesty's Government will also ask that there shall be commercial freedom for merchant-ships passing through the Straits, as M. Sazonof has already promised.

Except in so far as the naval and military operations on which His Majesty's Government are now engaged in the Dardanelles may contribute to the common cause of the Allies, it is now clear that these operations, however successful, cannot be of any advantage to His Majesty's Government in the final terms of peace. Russia alone will, if the war is successful, gather the direct fruits of these operations. Russia should therefore, in the opinion of His Majesty's Government, not now put difficulties in the way of any Power which may, on reasonable terms, offer to co-operate with the Allies. The only Power likely to participate in the operations in the Straits is Greece. Admiral Carden has asked the Admiralty to send him more destroyers, but they have none to spare. The assistance of a Greek flotilla, if it could have been secured, would thus have been of inestimable value to His Majesty's Government.

To induce the neutral Balkan States to join the Allies was one of the main objects which His Majesty's Government had in view when they undertook the operations in the Dardanelles. His Majesty's Government hope that Russia will spare no pains to calm the apprehensions of Bulgaria and Roumania as to Russia's possession

of the Straits and Constantinople being to their disadvantage. His Majesty's Government also hope that Russia will do everything in her power to render the co-operation of these two States an attractive prospect to them.

Sir E. Grey points out that it will obviously be necessary to take into consideration the whole question of the future interests of France and Great Britain in what is now Asiatic Turkey ; and, in formulating the desiderata of His Majesty's Government with regard to the Ottoman Empire, he must consult the French as well as the Russian Government. As soon, however, as it becomes known that Russia is to have Constantinople at the conclusion of the war, Sir E. Grey will wish to state that throughout the negotiations, His Majesty's Government have stipulated that the Mussulman Holy Places and Arabia shall under all circumstances remain under independent Mussulman dominion.

Sir E. Grey is as yet unable to make any definite proposal on any point of the British desiderata ; but one of the points of the latter will be the revision of the Persian portion of the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1907 so as to recognise the present neutral sphere as a British sphere.

Until the Allies are in a position to give to the Balkan States, and especially to Bulgaria and Roumania, some satisfactory assurance as to their prospects and general position with regard to the territories contiguous to their frontiers to the possession of which they are known to aspire ; and until a more advanced stage of the agreement as to the French and British desiderata in the final peace terms is reached, Sir E. Grey points out that it is most desirable that the understanding now arrived at between the Russian, French, and British Governments should remain secret.

4. FRENCH AMBASSADOR IN PETROGRAD TO RUSSIAN FOREIGN MINISTER, 1/14 MARCH 1915.¹

I should be grateful to Your Excellency for informing His Imperial Majesty that the Government of the French Republic, having studied the conditions of the peace to be imposed on Turkey, would like to annex Syria together with the region of the Gulf of Alexandretta and Cilicia up to the Taurus (mountain) range. I should be happy to inform my government, without delay, of the Imperial Government's consent.

1. Translated from the French text in J. Polonsky, trans., *Documents diplomatiques secrets russes 1914-1917 d'après les archives du ministère des affaires étrangères à Petrograd* (Paris, 1928), p. 288.

5. RUSSIAN ASSISTANT MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS TO RUSSIAN
FOREIGN MINISTER 2/15 MARCH 1915¹

The French Ambassador has told me that it is his impression that Syria "includes Palestine". I deemed it useful to remind him that there is in Jerusalem an independent governor.

6. RUSSIAN FOREIGN MINISTER TO RUSSIAN AMBASSADOR IN
PARIS, 3/16 MARCH 1915²

After arrival at General Headquarters, the French Ambassador informed me of the contents of Delcasse's telegram which asks for consent by Russia to the annexation of Syria and Cilicia by France. Paleologue explains that in his opinion the French Government refers also to Palestine when speaking of Syria. However, since in this telegram there is no question of Palestine, it would be desirable to elucidate whether the explanation of the Ambassador really corresponds to the view of the French Government. This question appears important to us ; for, if the Imperial Government should be prepared largely to satisfy France's desires concerning Syria and Cilicia proper, it is indispensable to study the question with closer attention, if the Holy Places are involved.

7. RUSSIAN FOREIGN MINISTER TO RUSSIAN AMBASSADOR IN
PARIS, 5/18 MARCH 1915³

On 23 February [8 March 1915] the Ambassador of France declared to me, in the name of his Government, that France was prepared to consider in the most benevolent manner the realization of our desires relative to Constantinople and the Straits, which I explained to you in my telegram No. 937 and for which I charged you to express my gratitude to M. Delcasse. In these earlier conversations with you Delcasse had assured us several times that we could count on the sympathy of France and had simply pleaded the necessity of elucidating the attitude of England, from whom he feared objections, before he could himself give more formal assurances in the sense already indicated.

Now, today, the British Government has expressed to us in writing its full accord in the matter of the annexation by Russia of the Straits and Constantinople within the boundaries fixed by us;

1. Translated from French text in Polonsky, *op. cit.*, p. 290.

2. Translated from French text in Polonsky, *op. cit.*, p. 290.

3. Translated from the French text in E. A. Adamov, comp., *Constantinople et les detroits* (Paris, 1930), vol. 1, pp. 215-16.

it has simply formulated one reservation concerning the safeguard of its economic interests and an equally benevolent attitude on our part toward the political aspirations of England in other areas.

Insofar as it concerns me personally, the assurance received from Delcasse is amply sufficient, because of the complete confidence that he inspires in me; but the Imperial Government would desire the French Government to issue more precise declarations like [those of the] British Government regarding its assent to the complete realization of our desires.

8. RUSSIAN FOREIGN MINISTER TO RUSSIAN AMBASSADOR IN
LONDON, 7/20 MARCH 1915¹

Referring to the memorandum of the British Embassy here of 12 March, will you please express to Grey the profound gratitude of the Imperial Government for the complete and definitive approval of Great Britain to a solution of the question of the Straits and Constantinople that satisfies Russia's desires. The Imperial Government appreciates fully the sentiments of the British Government and is convinced that the sincere recognition of their respective interests will guarantee in perpetuity firm friendship between Russia and Great Britain. Having already given assurances respecting the commercial regime in the Straits and Constantinople, the Imperial Government sees no objection to confirming its assent to the establishment (1) of free transit through Constantinople for all goods not deriving from or destined for Russia and (2) free passage through the Straits for merchant vessels.

With a view to facilitating the capture of the Dardanelles undertaken by the Allies, the Imperial Government will endeavor to obtain the intervention on reasonable terms of those states whose help is considered useful by Great Britain and France.

The Imperial Government completely shares the view of the British Government on the maintenance of the Muslim Holy Places under an independent Muslim government. It is necessary to elucidate at once whether [those places] will remain under the suzerainty of Turkey, the Sultan retaining the title of Caliph, or it is contemplated to create new independent states, in order to permit the Imperial Government to formulate its views in full knowledge of the case. For its part the Imperial Government desires that the Caliphate should be separated from Turkey. In any case, the freedom of pilgrimage must be completely secured.

1. Translated from the French text in Adamov, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, pp. 217-219.

The Imperial Government confirms its assent to the inclusion of the neutral zone of Persia in the English sphere of influence. At the same time, however, [the Imperial Government] regards it as equitable to stipulate that the districts adjoining the cities of Isfahan and Yazd, forming with them an inseparable whole, should be reserved for Russia in view of the interests that Russia possesses there; a part of the neutral zone which now forms a wedge between the Russian and Afghan frontiers and touches Russia's frontier at Zulfiqar, must also be included in the Russian sphere of influence.

Railway construction in the neutral zone constitutes for the Imperial Government a question of capital significance that will require further amicable discussion.

The Imperial Government expects that in the future its full liberty of action will be recognized in the sphere of influence thus delimited and that in particular it will enjoy the right preferentially [to develop] its financial and economic policy.

Finally, the Imperial Government considers it desirable simultaneously to solve the question of northern Afghanistan adjoining Russia in conformity with the wishes expressed on the subject by [the Imperial Government] in the course of negotiations last year.

9. *Note verbale*, FROM FRENCH AMBASSADOR AT PETROGRAD TO
RUSSIAN FOREIGN MINISTER, 28 MARCH/10 APRIL 1915¹

The Government of the [French] Republic will give its agreement to the Russian *aide-memoire* addressed by M. Isvolsky to M. Delcasse on 6 March last [Doc. 1, above], relating to Constantinople and the Straits, on condition that war shall be prosecuted until victory and that France and Great Britain realise their plans in the Orient as elsewhere, as it is stated in the Russian *aide-memoire*.

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