

Keeping the Germans Out of the Straits: The Five Ottoman Dreadnought Thesis Reconsidered

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Abstract

This article contests Sean McMeekin's claims concerning Russian culpability for the First World War. McMeekin maintains that Ottoman rearmament, particularly the purchase of several battleships released onto the global arms market by South American states, threatened to create a situation where the Russian Black Sea Fleet would be outclassed by its Ottoman opposite number. Rather than waiting for this to happen, the tsarist regime chose to go to war. Yet, contrary to McMeekin's claims, the Ottoman naval expansion never assumed threatening dimensions because the Porte was unable to purchase battleships from Chile or Argentina. As a result, it provided no incentive for Russia to go to war in 1914.

Keywords

Origins of the First World War, Navy, Ottoman Empire, Germany, Britain

In a new and controversial analysis of Russia's role in the origins of the First World War, Sean McMeekin has recently argued that one of the key triggers for the conflict that engulfed Europe in 1914 – if not, in fact, the most significant – was the Russian desire to dismember the Ottoman Empire.¹ Among many choice items on the Russian list of objectives to be secured from such a 'war of the Ottoman Succession', none was more

1 Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge, MA, 2011). McMeekin's argument is not new in the sense of attributing responsibility for the war to Russia – this was a staple of interwar German revisionism and anti-Versailles propaganda – rather it is new in its specific formulation.

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important in motivating the regime in St Petersburg than the prospect of gaining control over the straits constricting unfettered access from the Russian ports on the Black Sea to the open waters of the Mediterranean. According to McMeekin, this objective lay at the heart of tsarist policy: it was the outcome that Russian statesmen strove tirelessly to achieve and explains why the Russian government, aware that this could not be acquired by peaceful means, was so eager to provoke a war that would allow them to realize by violent action that which they could not attain by diplomacy. It is McMeekin's contention that in 1914 the Russian government was finally able to provoke the showdown designed to facilitate this goal. Thus, in his view, the conflict that broke out that year had less to do with protecting Serbia, preserving the position of the so-called 'Triple Entente' in the face of German expansionism, or maintaining the balance of power in Europe than it had with the achievement of this one specific long-term Russian territorial and geopolitical aspiration.

The capture of Constantinople had, of course, long been a goal of successive Russian governments and this aim could hardly have been described as a secret one. Other powers knew of this aspiration – indeed, as the Crimean War vividly illustrates, they had previously combined together to resist it – and, consequently, the Russian government had shown itself willing, in the past, to play a long waiting game in the furtherance of this goal. On the face of it, nothing had changed in 1914 to make waiting a less sensible or less attractive policy. Indeed, at that juncture, there were many good reasons to eschew war and maintain such a policy of patience. Most important of all, in the then competitive world of relative armed strength engendered by the ongoing European land armaments race, Russia had everything to gain by delaying conflict. The reason for this was that while the huge German Army Bills of 1912 and 1913 were already beginning to have some effect, the recently initiated Russian great military expansion programme would not bear fruit until 1917. Hence, in terms of relative armed strength, 1914 was a year in which the balance of power favoured Russia's enemies. All of this leads to one obvious and inevitable question: even if one accepts that Russia sought control of the Straits, why would it choose 1914 as the moment for starting a war for this purpose?

McMeekin anticipates this question and provides more than one answer, framing an analysis of Russian thinking that involves several layers of calculation. One of the most crucial aspects of this, however, relates to the Russians' apparent belief that they were being outmanoeuvred politically, diplomatically, and, most significantly, militarily in the crucial Black Sea arena. Following the disastrous wars of 1911 against Italy and then of 1912 and 1913 against the Balkan states, 'the Turks were arming themselves to the teeth'² to an extent that threatened to neutralize Russia's ability to project sufficient power in the region to realize its goal of seizing the Straits. A particularly threatening aspect of the Ottoman arms build-up was their naval expansion. A British naval mission had been based in the Porte since 1908, with the ostensible purpose of modernizing the antiquated and inefficient Ottoman navy. Moreover, the British were also selling to the Ottoman Empire modern dreadnought battleships. Two such state-of-the-art vessels of the *Reshadieh* class had been ordered from Vickers and Armstrong respectively in 1911.³

2 Ibid., p. 30.

3 Jonathan Grant, 'The Sword of the Sultan: Ottoman Arms Imports, 1854–1914', *Journal of Military History* LXVI (2002), pp. 29–30.

While the second vessel was subsequently cancelled owing to severe budgetary problems at the Porte, once Turkish finances had improved, as was evident by 1913, the Ottoman government was able to reconstitute its building programme by taking over the contract for the *Rio de Janeiro*, a battleship originally ordered by Brazil but no longer wanted by that power. With the purchase of this vessel, renamed the *Sultan Osman I*, the Ottoman government once again had two new battleships under contract.

Could this really have pushed St Petersburg towards war? As the Porte had placed its first dreadnought order with Vickers in 1911, the building of this vessel can hardly have come as a sudden surprise to the Russian government in 1914; it had responded with the obvious countermeasure of laying down three such vessels itself.⁴ Equally, the substitution of the *Sultan Osman I* for the second vessel of the *Reshadieh* class merely restored to two warships a purchasing programme that had originally stood at two warships – no doubt a disappointment for St Petersburg, especially if it had basked contentedly in the fleeting reduction of the Ottoman order of battle to a single unit, but hardly a great upset. Clearly, therefore, this alone would not have tipped Russia into waging war.⁵ What apparently caused such consternation among the tsar's ministers that at the start of 1914 imminent belligerency suddenly became the preferred option was a much more radical change in the future prospects of the Ottoman navy. It is McMeekin's contention that, despite having only two battleships in the offing at the end of 1913, 'by January 1914 Turkey had no less than *five* imported dreadnoughts on order'.⁶ These consisted of the two vessels already mentioned above plus a further three units that had been purchased prior to their completion from two governments in South America that no longer desired them. They were the *Almirante Latorre*, which had been laid down in December 1911 at Armstrong's yard for Chile, and the *Moreno* and *Rivadavia*,⁷ which were then building in the United States for Argentina.

In McMeekin's estimation it was this massive spurt in the Ottoman accumulation of naval assets, an accumulation which threatened to change the power dynamic in the Black Sea in a manner not previously anticipated in St Petersburg, which forced Russia to act so decisively in 1914. A force of five modern dreadnoughts would utterly outclass the Russian Black Sea Fleet, which then comprised only elderly and obsolete pre-dreadnought battleships. Even when the Russian navy completed its ongoing Black Sea modernization programme – which consisted of three new dreadnought battleships, which were due to start coming into service in 1915 – the new Turkish force would enjoy

4 Michael A. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908–1918* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 31–2.

5 Bobroff shows conclusively that Russian navalists were far more concerned about the Baltic than the Black Sea and that the Russian naval authorities were unconcerned by these two British-built dreadnoughts. Ronald P. Bobroff, *Roads to Glory: Late Imperial Russia and the Turkish Straits* (London, 2006), pp. 80–1. In a similar vein, Gatrell shows that, for the Russian Naval Staff, the Baltic rather than the Black Sea was the key theatre. Peter Gatrell, *Government, Industry and Rearmament in Russia, 1900–1914: The Last Argument of Tsarism* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 135–8.

6 McMeekin, *Russian Origins*, p. 36. Emphasis in the original.

7 McMeekin erroneously refers to this vessel as the *Rivadia*. *Ibid.*

a marked superiority in numbers. More worrying still, according to McMeekin, it would also be superior in quality. As he explains: 'because the Turks' three state-of-the-art British ships all mounted thirteen-and-a-half inch guns – the *Sultan Osman I* would mount more guns than any ship ever afloat – they would greatly outclass the Russian ships' twelve-inch guns'.⁸ This combination of quantitative and qualitative superiority was a development the implementation of which was not to be countenanced and led directly to secret Russian war planning.

In the face of the game-changing Turkish armaments acquisitions revealed in January 1914, an important 'special conference' was held by senior members of the Russian military and civilian leadership on 8/21 February 1914 to hammer out a response.⁹ But what could Russia do? The first and most obvious option was for St Petersburg to approach Britain, the builder of three of these vessels and Russia's nominal partner in the Triple Entente, air its concerns, and seek a remedy. According to McMeekin, the attempt to gain redress through this process, if anything, made matters worse because of what McMeekin evidently sees as Britain's evasive, not to say highly disingenuous, diplomatic stance. Initial conversations undertaken with the British embassy in St Petersburg got nowhere because, as McMeekin notes with undisguised incredulity, Sir George Buchanan, the ambassador, responded to all Russian representations 'in apparent ignorance that the warships in question were in fact under contract to Turkey'.¹⁰ Subsequent Russian diplomacy in London fared no better: the British government, after choosing some flimsy pretext not to answer Russian inquiries for many months, eventually claimed to be powerless to interfere in what was characterized as a private business matter. McMeekin's view of this 'British blow-off', as he calls it, is clear. In his analogy, it would be as if during the Cold War Britain had sought an alliance with the United States and, at the same time, also undertaken to sell nuclear weapons to the Soviet Union and advised America's main enemy on how best to use them.¹¹ It was 'Perfidious Albion' at its worst.

As a result, with all practical redress from Britain unobtainable, it is hardly to be wondered that Russia found 1914 an attractive moment for resorting to war. It was the tsarist regime's only opportunity to attain its goal before the Turkish navy became too powerful to deal with and the long-sought dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire became an impossible dream.

McMeekin's book has received many complimentary reviews, and within several of these the importance has been especially highlighted of the five Ottoman dreadnoughts as a new and convincing evidential factor in the attempt to place greater emphasis on the Russian part in the origins of the First World War.¹² And, yet, for all that, it is a

8 Ibid., pp. 36–7.

9 Other historians have also considered this conference and drawn quite different conclusions as to its significance. See, for example, David Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War: Europe, 1904–1914* (Oxford, 1996), p. 348.

10 McMeekin, *Russian Origins*, p. 38.

11 Ibid., p. 37.

12 See, for example, the review by James D. Perry in *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* XXV (2012), p. 675. Even some critical reviews note the importance of the five dreadnought claim. See Richard J. Evans in the *New Republic*, 5 December 2011.

remarkable fact that McMeekin advances no documentary or historical authorities for many key aspects of his five Ottoman dreadnought argument. Among the claims that remain unsupported are the assertion that the battleships building for the Porte were superior to and would inevitably overpower the Russian dreadnoughts under construction in the Black Sea, the contention that Turkey had purchased three additional dreadnoughts in January 1914 over and above the two that had previously formed the core of its expansion, and the characterization of British diplomacy in response to Russian requests for aid in this matter as deliberately obtuse and obstructive. As will be suggested below, this lack of documentary or historiographical grounding is a major shortcoming, because each and every one of these points is open to serious objection not just on interpretative grounds, where historians can, of course, legitimately differ, but also on factual grounds, where such differences are of more questionable legitimacy.

Let us first consider McMeekin's claim about the superior quality of the ships under construction by British firms for the Ottoman navy as compared with those being built by the Russians in their own yards for their Black Sea Fleet. This contention is based exclusively upon the premise that, because the vessels being built in Britain mounted a main battery composed of larger calibre guns (expressed in terms of the barrel's bore diameter) than those under construction in Russia, they were consequently more powerful ships. As noted above, McMeekin asserts the larger calibre guns of the Turks' British-built ships would have greatly outclassed those of the Russian ships.¹³ The force behind this argument is clear enough: mounting heavier ordnance makes for a more powerful ship. While there is certainly a clear logic in operation here, the argument is not the incontestable truism that it might seem, as there is, in fact, no absolute correlation between the fighting power of a warship and the calibre of its guns. One of the complicating realities of naval architecture is that all warship design is a compromise. On any given displacement the designers of a man-of-war have to balance the weight devoted to armament against that apportioned to protection and that assigned to propulsion. In this zero-sum game, more or bigger guns can only be obtained at the expense of less armour or smaller engines. Thus, they come at a cost, be that cost expressed in lower speed or greater vulnerability. In that context, the decision to emphasize offensive capability, even if purchased at the expense of weaker defensive capabilities, is one that many warship designers have made and can be a good trade-off, but this is certainly not always the case.

The battle of Jutland provides several examples of heavily armed but weakly armoured British vessels that were destroyed in combat by more heavily protected German warships mounting smaller guns. The 12-inch-gunned HMS *Indefatigable*, for example, which was battered to pieces in half an hour by the 11-inch-gunned *Von Der Tann* is a case in point. Clearly, the German vessel was not 'greatly outclassed' despite its lighter ordnance. In a similar way, the 57 officers and 1209 ratings who perished when HMS *Queen Mary*, which mounted 13.5-inch artillery, lost its gunnery duel with the German battlecruiser *Derfflinger*, armed with 12-inch guns, also serve as unwilling testament to the fact that heavier weaponry is a design choice but not one that in and of itself provides a guarantee of battlefield superiority.

13 McMeekin, *Russian Origins*, pp. 36–7.

This painfully acquired point was not lost on the Royal Navy. In the aftermath of Jutland, one of the lessons scrupulously applied to British battleship design was that protection and survivability were at least as important as raw hitting power, if not actually more so. Nothing is more telling in this respect than the fact that Admiral Sir Ernle (later Lord) Chatfield, who as captain of the battlecruiser *Lion* at Jutland had witnessed the explosion of a succession of poorly armoured British battlecruisers, and whose own ship had only narrowly escaped a similar fate, ‘was determined’, once he became First Sea Lord, ‘not to build ... ships that were unbalanced owing to so much weight being put into guns that they would have too little protective armour’.¹⁴ As a result, the *King George V* class, the battleships whose construction he oversaw, were heavily protected, but mounted a primary armament smaller in calibre than their foreign contemporaries. Clearly, he did not believe that gun-power alone was the decisive factor.

However, even were it valid to assert, as McMeekin does, that heavier ordnance conferred a definite and unqualified advantage, it would still not be possible to conclude that all of Turkey’s British-built dreadnoughts outclassed their Russian counterparts. The reason for this is that, contrary to what McMeekin claims, not all the battleships being built in Britain for the Turkish navy mounted 13.5 inch guns. Indeed, somewhat ironically, the *Sultan Osman I*, the one vessel specifically named by McMeekin as an illustration of this supposed Turkish ordnance superiority, actually shipped a primary armament that was entirely composed of 12 inch guns, the very same calibre of weaponry that was mounted on Russia’s putative Black Sea dreadnoughts.¹⁵ If the *Sultan Osman I* was a superior vessel – in fact, a very doubtful proposition given its great length and weak main armour belt – this superiority certainly did not come from any advantage in the calibre of its main battery armament. Factually, therefore, this assertion of qualitative superiority is a highly doubtful one.

If the claims about the qualitative superiority of the Ottoman navy’s dreadnoughts over their Russian counterparts do not entirely stand up to scrutiny, even less viable is the assertion of their numerical superiority. It will be recalled that McMeekin maintains that in contrast to the Russian Black Sea Fleet, which had three battleships under construction, ‘by January 1914 Turkey had no less than *five* imported dreadnoughts on order’.¹⁶ The basis on which this claim is made is never actually specified. This is significant because the assertion that there were five battleships being built for Turkey cannot be reconciled with any of the obvious sources.¹⁷ These suggest that in January 1914 the Ottoman Empire had on the books exactly the same number of dreadnoughts that it had had on order in December 1913, namely two. These were the *Reshadieh* and the *Sultan Osman I*. As will be shown, neither the Argentine nor the Chilean dreadnoughts

14 Lord Chatfield, *It Might Happen Again* (London, 1947), p. 5.

15 Full particulars of the *Sultan Osman I*, including its armament, can be found in numerous texts. Among the more authoritative are: R.A. Burt, *British Battleships of World War One* (rev. edn, Annapolis, 2012); Oscar Parkes, *British Battleships, 1860–1950* (London, 1966).

16 McMeekin, *Russian Origins*, p. 36.

17 For example, Paul G. Halpern, *The Mediterranean Naval Situation, 1908–1914* (Harvard, 1971).

mentioned by McMeekin had been purchased by the Porte in January 1914, nor would they be purchased by Turkey in the following months.

The saga of the Argentine dreadnoughts *Rivadavia* and *Moreno*, although a complex one, is the easier of the two to tell as its various twists and turns have already been catalogued with great clarity and precision by Seward Livermore in an article published some seven decades ago. Helpfully, the story has also subsequently been augmented with additional materials in important works by William Kaldis and Paul Halpern.¹⁸ Collectively, these accounts not only analyse the Argentine decision to order these vessels – they were procured as part of a South American arms race triggered by an ill-advised Brazilian naval expansion programme¹⁹ – but also provide considerable detail concerning the doubts that arose in Argentina about the purchase once the initial jingoism that had inspired their acquisition had worn off and the long-term financial implications of commissioning two of the largest type of warships became increasingly apparent. By 1913, rumours abounded that the government wished to dispose of these battleships, and it was said that both Greece and Russia had made offers for them. Nevertheless, although there was a groundswell of opinion in the Argentine legislature that one of these offers should be accepted and the financial burden of these vessels passed on to some other misguided country, this did not occur. One reason for this was that the two dreadnoughts embodied some of the latest features of American naval technology, including ordnance and mechanical devices then in service with the United States Navy. While the American government was not troubled at the prospect of these materials being used by Argentina, a country within its sphere of influence, it was not at all eager for these installations to fall into the hands of possible future naval rivals in Europe or Japan. Accordingly, the American government put considerable pressure on Buenos Aires not to sell the warships. This proved successful. Although three bills promoting such a sale were introduced into the Argentine chamber of deputies in May 1914, none were successful, and by the end of June it was clear that Argentina would complete its purchase of these battleships.²⁰ Accordingly, it was no great surprise to anyone when the vessels finally arrived in the River Plate in 1915.

Three points are especially notable from Livermore's account. First of all, although rumours of a possible disposal of the Argentine dreadnoughts were circulating in January 1914, there was no prospect of an actual sale until May at the very earliest when the appropriate bills were put before the Argentine legislature. McMeekin's suggestion that the vessels had already been transferred in January 1914 is, therefore, chronologically untenable. Second, had the vessels been sold, there was no reason to suppose that the

18 Seward W. Livermore, 'Battleship Diplomacy in South America, 1905–1925', *Journal of Modern History* XVI (1944), pp. 31–48; William Kaldis, 'Background for Conflict: Greece, Turkey, and the Aegean Islands, 1912–1914', *Journal of Modern History* LI (1979), pp. D1119–46; Halpern, *Mediterranean Naval Situation*. None of these authors are cited by McMeekin.

19 Details of this South American arms race can be found in Jonathan A. Grant, *Rulers, Guns and Money: The Global Arms Trade in the Age of Imperialism* (Harvard, 2007), pp. 146–67.

20 Livermore, 'Battleship Diplomacy', p. 46.

Ottoman regime would have been the beneficiary. The contract for the vessels specified that first refusal went to the United States, a government that, for reasons already stated, was not at all eager to see these ships in European hands.²¹ Yet, even had the Americans decided not to exercise their option and thereby sanctioned the disposal, it was most unlikely that these battleships would have ended up in Turkey's possession. Given the acute Russian interest in these vessels and the parlous state of the Ottoman finances, made worse by Russian efforts to cut Turkey off from sources of foreign credit,²² the chances were slim that the Porte would have been able to outbid St Petersburg in any competition to take over the contract.²³ This was certainly the view of the British government, and explains why it was that, when new rumours began to circulate in May 1914 that the *Rivadavia* and *Moreno* would be sold by Argentina, the presumed purchaser was not the Ottoman but the Russian government.²⁴ However, none of these considerations ever became relevant because, finally and most importantly, there was no sale. Despite all the chitchat, the Argentine navy, predictably enough, wanted to keep the vessels, and the Argentine government, although mindful about the costs, was similarly inclined. As a result, at the conclusion of the sale versus retention debate in the Argentine legislature in June 1914, the *Moreno* and *Rivadavia* remained firmly in Argentine hands.

A similar situation prevailed in respect of the Chilean battleships. Like Argentina, the government in Santiago had ordered its two dreadnoughts – named the *Almirante Latorre* and the *Almirante Cochrane* – as part of the South American arms race that had been prompted by the Brazilian naval expansion. Once again, as was the case with Argentina, this was very much a prestige project that the nation could ill afford and, consequently, once Brazil disposed of the *Rio de Janeiro*, rumours were rife that Chile would likewise get rid of at least one, if not both, of the battleships it had on order. Reinforcing these murmurings, a strong agitation developed in the country supportive of such a sale, the prospect of which quickly attracted numerous interested parties. The Porte was undeniably one of these – the British minister was informed that Turkey had made an offer, and reported this to London²⁵ – but Greece, alarmed at the Ottoman purchase of the *Rio de Janeiro*, was most decidedly another; and, of course, there was also Russia, whose government explored both the possibility of facilitating a Greek purchase via a French loan or, failing that, of buying the vessels itself. However, in the event none of these possible outcomes came to pass. The Chilean government soon made it clear that it had no intention of parting with the ships – although for reasons of cost and the difficulties of finding the necessary manpower to crew both vessels simultaneously, the delivery of the

21 Ibid.

22 Mustafa Aksakal, *The Ottoman Road to War in 1914* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 61.

23 Bodger argues that at 35 million roubles each, the purchase of these vessels was beyond Russia's reach. However, as in March 1914 the tsar authorized the laying down of a fourth Black Sea dreadnought and two light cruisers at a cost of 110 million roubles, sufficient money was evidently available for purchasing the Argentine vessels had the opportunity existed. Alan Bodger, 'Russia and the End of the Ottoman Empire', in Marian Kent, ed., *The Great Powers and the End of the Ottoman Empire* (London, 1996), p. 84.

24 Admiralty to Foreign Office, 10 June 1914, Kew, The National Archives (TNA), FO 371/2093.

25 Kerr to Grey, 26 January 1914, TNA, FO 371/1923.

Almirante Cochrane was pushed back a year. Moreover, as a concession to its well-known sensibilities, in January 1914 an assurance was given to Russia, via the builders, Armstrong, Whitworth & Co., that on no account would the *Almirante Latorre* be sold to Turkey.²⁶ None of this, however, prevented the Russians pushing Chile to sell them the ships instead. In March 1914 Sir Charles Ottley, a former director of Naval Intelligence and a senior figure at Armstrong's, informed the British Foreign Office that his firm, which was also the designated agent of the Chilean government, had 'received a substantial offer from the Russian Government for the purchase of the two Chilean battleships under construction at Armstrong's'.²⁷ Nothing came of this attempt, but failure merely prompted further efforts by Russian diplomats in subsequent months to get their hands on these ships. They, too, would prove unsuccessful. The reason was straightforward. As the Chilean minister in London informed the British Foreign Office in June, this was not due to any antipathy towards Russia, but because 'his Government did not intend to sell them'. And to reinforce the point he disclosed the further information that 'the President [of Chile] had declared that, as long as he held office, these ships, which were ordered because Chile needed them, would not be sold to any power whatever, unless it were to Great Britain'.²⁸ Given this strength of view it is little wonder that, when war broke out in August 1914, both these vessels were still owned by Chile, from whose government (rather than Turkey) the Royal Navy requisitioned the ships (by special purchase) on its entry into the war.²⁹

Once again, as this account shows, there are clear problems both with McMeekin's chronology about a putative sale and with his conclusions about its actual occurrence. While it is certainly true that rumours of a possible Chilean disposal of warships were circulating in January 1914, this did not equate to an actual sale, McMeekin's confident assertions on this point notwithstanding. Indeed, the fact that Russia was still seeking to tempt the government in Santiago to part with its dreadnoughts in March is proof positive not only that no such transfer had taken place, but, just as significantly, that the Russians knew this. After all, had the ships already been sold, Russian negotiations with Chile for their acquisition would have been pointless. The idea that Turkey had purchased the *Almirante Latorre* as early as January can, therefore, be dismissed. So, too, can the idea that the Porte ever took over the contract for this vessel, an eventuality that the Chilean government had specifically and definitively ruled out. Indeed, somewhat ironically given McMeekin's thesis, if any country came close to acquiring a Chilean dreadnought, it was not Turkey but Russia. According to Halpern's research, Russian persistence almost bore fruit in relation to the purchase of the *Almirante Cochrane*.

26 Halpern, *Mediterranean Naval Situation*, p. 308.

27 Ottley to Tyrell, 13 March 1914, TNA, FO 800/88, f. 19.

28 Memorandum by Ralph Paget for Sir Edward Grey, 15 June 1914, TNA, FO 371/1923.

29 Chile's terms for the British takeover of the *Almirante Latorre*, essentially the purchase price plus 5% interest on any monies already paid and an additional sum to cover the cost of ordering a new battleship at some future date, can be found in 'Copy of the Memorandum handed to the Hon. Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty by the Chilean Minister in London on the 24th of September, 1914, at a conference to which he was invited by the First Lord', TNA, FO 800/76, ff. 206–13.

In June the minister of marine in Santiago, presumably without the sanction of his president, momentarily relented in his previously dogged desire to keep it and actually approved the sale in principle. Of course, he could not make this decision entirely on his own and it was quickly frustrated, not least by the determined opposition of the Chilean legation in London.³⁰

The McMeekin thesis that three South American dreadnoughts were purchased by Turkey in January 1914 in time for this information to play a decisive part in the Russian 'special conference' of February 1914 is thus factually inaccurate. Of course, it is always possible that in January 1914 – and conceivably even in February – the Russian government believed the rumours about such a purchase. However, if so, it is evident from its own subsequent efforts to purchase the Chilean vessels that by March at the very latest it had been disabused of this notion. The political disputes in the Argentine legislature over the future of its naval programme would have served the same purpose in clarifying for the Russian government the situation regarding that country's dreadnoughts. Consequently, in the immediate run-up to the First World War, fears of a large-scale Ottoman naval expansion were not driving Russian policy to war, because the Russian government was well aware that the earlier reported rumours on this matter were without foundation.

Given that no additional South American dreadnoughts were purchased by Turkey either in January 1914 or, indeed, anytime thereafter, the reason for Britain's diffident response to Russia's diplomatic overtures on the topic of Ottoman naval expansion becomes somewhat clearer. Sir George Buchanan reacted 'in apparent ignorance that the warships in question were in fact under contract to Turkey'³¹ for the simple reason that the ships in question were not under contract to Turkey. Similarly, McMeekin's incredulity that Sazonov did not mention South American dreadnoughts when issuing 'his first formal protest, dated 8 May 1914,'³² is now explained: by that time, the Russian minister knew full well that these ships had not been acquired by the Porte. The implication of these corrections for McMeekin's characterization of British diplomacy on this matter is potentially significant. Far from being evasive and disingenuous, British diplomats were being quite open and honest on the point of Turkish warship purchases. Accordingly, a reassessment of this diplomacy in the light of the known facts is required and will be provided below.

Contrary to McMeekin's provocative conclusion that Britain was deliberately and perversely undermining Russia's position at the Straits, the evidence from the British diplomatic and naval archives suggests that this was not the policy of London at all. Far from attempting to keep Russia away from the Straits, British diplomatic behaviour was actually motivated by the quite different desire of seeing off the strong challenge for influence at the Porte then coming from Germany.³³ As the Foreign Office's response to

30 Halpern, *Mediterranean Naval Situation*, p. 311.

31 McMeekin, *Russian Origins*, p. 38.

32 *Ibid.*

33 Some interesting comments on this point can be found in Chris B. Rooney, 'The International Significance of British Naval Missions to the Ottoman Empire, 1908–1914', *Middle Eastern Studies* XXXIV (1998), pp. 1–29. The analysis below supplements and refines this in the light of McMeekin's specific claims.

Sazonov's protest pointed out, the supply of a naval mission to the Ottoman Empire allowed the British government to exercise some degree of influence at Constantinople and that influence, in shaping Turkish policy, was beneficial to all of the Entente powers, Russia included. By contrast, the alternative course of action of refusing to participate in the modernization of the Turkish navy would not only have deprived Britain of that influence, but worse still would have allowed another, possibly unfriendly, power to undertake that role in Britain's place, with possibly catastrophic diplomatic consequences. As the memorandum forcefully stated:

If His Majesty's Government had refused the Turkish application it is quite certain that the reorganisation of the Turkish navy would have been entrusted to Germany, and His Majesty's Government feel confident that the Russian Government will share their belief that an arrangement which might have placed the reorganisation of both the naval and military forces of Turkey in the hands of one Power would not have been to the real interest of either Turkey or of Great Britain and Russia.³⁴

The British point was well made. In particular, the allusion to the recently dispatched German military mission to Turkey would most definitely not have been lost on St Petersburg. An alarmed and outraged Russian government had protested in the strongest terms when in 1913 a German general, Otto Liman von Sanders, had been appointed to command the Ottoman military forces at the Straits.³⁵ It was an increase in German control that simply could not be countenanced. In the words of Mikhail Giers, the Russian ambassador in Constantinople, it did not suit St Petersburg to have Germany as a neighbour in Asia.³⁶ For this reason the British expectation that the prospect of a German admiral exercising executive command over Ottoman naval units in Constantinople must surely have been equally unwelcome to Russia seems incontestable, especially as this could have resulted in both a German admiral and a German general operating in concert to cement German influence at this vital strategic point. Consequently, on the matter of an expanding German presence in the Ottoman capital and the need to stem it, it can safely be assumed that Britain and Russia would have shared similar views, thereby making the British reply hard to refute.

Of course, it might be argued that a formal British diplomatic message to the Russian government is hardly conclusive proof of London's real thinking: after all, would not the Foreign Office simply tailor its words to the circumstances and provide the Russians with the answer most likely to correspond to their particular sensibilities? While there is undoubtedly some salience to this putative objection, the secret internal papers of the British government reveal that anxiety over the spread of German influence in the Ottoman Empire was, in fact, the real driver of British policy regarding their naval

34 Memorandum of 9 June 1914 enclosed in Grey to Buchanan, 10 June 1914, TNA, FO 371/2114.

35 David McDonald, *United Government and Foreign Policy in Russia, 1900–1914* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), pp. 190–6.

36 H.S.W. Corrigan, 'German-Turkish Relations and the Outbreak of War in 1914: A Re-assessment', *Past & Present* XXXVI (1967), p. 149.

mission there and had been for some time. In informing St Petersburg of this fact they were revealing both their motives and intent, and doing so in a remarkably open and honest fashion. A few examples will illustrate the depth and influence of British anxiety on this point.

In the autumn of 1910 two issues arose in relation to the Turkish navy: first, the Ottoman government purchased two obsolete German pre-dreadnought battleships; second, the Turks applied to send some of their naval officers to Britain for training with the Royal Navy. Both developments had the potential to alter the balance of power in the Black Sea and were, therefore, inevitably going to be unappealing to Russia. The British government was, naturally, aware of this and, in the case of the Turkish request to have some of their officers serve temporarily on British warships, extremely sensitive to the possible ramifications for Anglo-Russian relations. For this and other reasons, the Foreign Office was far from enthusiastic about the application, with one official presciently minuting the additional objection: 'I hope we shall not be training officers who will eventually fight against us.' Despite such misgivings, it was not felt practical to refuse. The reason given: 'If we don't agree, they will go to the German fleet.'³⁷ The purchase of the pre-dreadnought battleships was not so obviously a British affair, seeing as the ships were acquired from another country, but indirectly, it, too, shone a light upon British policy. As the British embassy in St Petersburg relayed, while the Russians were not unduly worried about the British naval mission when the Turkish navy was weak, if Turkey embarked upon serious maritime expansion, 'the fact that the Young Turkish navy is being organised by British admirals will make an unfavourable impression'.³⁸ This caused some soul-searching in the Foreign Office, but no change of policy. As one official noted: 'If a British Admiral does not organise the Turkish fleet, a German admiral will be called in, who will push matters on with greater speed than we should.' Another minute ran: 'Turkey means to have a fleet whether we assist or not.' Accordingly, it was essential to ensure that 'the Turkish fleet should not become Germanized like the Turkish army'.³⁹

If a certain anxiety existed in London in 1910 that Germany was patiently waiting in the wings for an opportunity to take over the reorganization of the Turkish navy and thereby supplant British influence there, the events of early 1912 turned this into something of a paranoia. On 27 January, Sir Edward Goschen, the British ambassador in Berlin, forwarded a dispatch to London in which he notified his superiors that it had been reported in the German press that when Admiral Hugh Williams completed his term as the technical adviser to the Turkish navy in April, he would be replaced by a senior German admiral.⁴⁰ Panic promptly ensued in the Foreign Office. A telegram was immediately sent to the British Embassy in Constantinople directing the ambassador to inform the Grand Vizier that while 'His Majesty's Government hesitate to attach credence to this report ... they would regard with great gravity such action.'⁴¹ At the same time the

37 Unidentified minutes, 28 September 1910, TNA, FO 371/1015.

38 O'Beirne to Grey, 4 September 1910, TNA, FO 371/980.

39 Unidentified minutes, 12 September 1910, *ibid.*

40 Goschen to Grey, 27 January 1912, TNA, FO 371/1487.

41 Grey to Lowther, 29 January 1912, *ibid.*

Admiralty was contacted and advised to proceed immediately to find ‘an officer of energy and proved capacity’ to be ready to take over as soon as Williams’s post fell vacant.⁴² News was then received from Constantinople that the press article was false and that a British admiral was still desired. While this calmed some nerves in the Foreign Office, the shock that the original rumour had administered did not go away, and the fact that the Admiralty proceeded rather leisurely to nominate a new appointee caused further anxiety in relation to Germany. When nothing had been heard from the Admiralty by early March, an exasperated Alwyn Parker spoke for many in the Foreign Office when he noted:

The Adm[iral]ty are extremely tiresome in this as in all other matters relating to the Turkish fleet ... They are simply playing into the hands of Germany ... If we do not take care we shall have a repetition in regard to the navy of what happened in regard to the army in 1842 [*sic*], when [Helmuth von] Moltke [the elder] replaced major Williams and other British officers sent out to reform the Turkish army.

I think we should really impress the Adm[iral]ty at length with the urgency of the question.⁴³

Such concerns, at least, had the desired effect, with Arthur Limpus nominated to replace Williams.

This did not prevent the British government from continuing to worry about German influence at the Porte. A further spur to such fears was the report sent in by Admiral Williams concerning his experiences as naval adviser to the Ottoman government. A constant theme in the memorandum was Williams’s difficulties dealing with officials ‘with very strong German proclivities’. On account of this partiality, some of these officials were characterized by Williams as ‘very anti-British’ and eager to render his ‘position untenable’. The Foreign Office concurred, with one of the clerks noting on the report the constant ‘German intrigue against British influence in naval matters’.⁴⁴

Admiral Limpus did not dissent from this analysis. The ‘leaning towards Germany is very strong indeed’, he reported less than a year into his posting.⁴⁵ One of the drivers for this was that Germany continued to offer obsolete ships to the Ottoman government for sale on favourable terms. It was clear that this was being done not for financial gain but with a view to supplanting the Royal Navy in the role of training Turkish officers. Even the ambassador noted the obvious point: ‘if the Navy here is to be full of German ships, our argument that the officers should be English falls to the ground’.⁴⁶ Limpus, too, was worried and argued that unless Britain responded in kind, at least as far as training was concerned, German influence would take over. As he explained:

42 Minute by Parker, 30 January 1912, *ibid.*

43 Minute by Parker, 4 March 1912, *ibid.*

44 Report by Williams, 29 April 1912, and undated minute thereon, *ibid.*

45 Limpus to Churchill, 12 March 1913, TNA, ADM 1/8927.

46 Lowther to Nicolson, 13 March 1913, quoted in Geoffrey Miller, *Straits: British Policy Towards the Ottoman Empire and the Origins of the Dardanelles Campaign* (Hull, 1997) p. 141.

I foresee a still further increase in the German element in the Navy: also such a much more decided leaning towards Germany that German instructors may be the next step, with little chance of retaining English influence in the Turkish navy. The tendency is the stronger since certain senior officers here have acquired not only the language but material interests in Germany in the past. This letter is too long, so I will not attempt to describe a German controlled Turkey. But already in the army, the railways, and kindred concessions, the banks, and in commerce generally, the German position is an extremely strong one.

Limpus concluded that strong steps needed to be taken if Britain was not to lose its foothold in the navy.⁴⁷

The strong measure that Limpus ultimately suggested was to force the resignation of the pro-German undersecretary of state for the navy by threatening to withdraw the British mission altogether. This was not without risk. As the British ambassador pointed out, it could result in the British having to 'abandon their interest in this country' and the 'possible substitution of a German mission'.⁴⁸ Interestingly, while sharing Limpus's frustration, the Admiralty saw no reason to risk such an ultimatum. The logic behind this was that they believed that they held a trump card that would ultimately silence German intrigue and cement British naval influence. That trump card took the form of the Ottoman dreadnoughts being built in Britain. As Sir Henry Jackson the chief of the Admiralty War Staff noted: 'The Vickers-Armstrong contract provides an additional reason for wishing to maintain the British Naval Commission in Turkey, as the combination will tend to better resist interference from Germany in Turkish naval administration.'⁴⁹ In short, the warships being built in Britain for Turkey – much more modern and powerful than the obsolete vessels purchased from Germany – were seen in London as a positive means of restricting German influence at the Porte. Far from being an anti-Russian policy, it was one of which the British might legitimately expect Russia to approve. It is to be noted in this respect that whenever Britain did explain that it was acting to forestall Germany, as for example over the training of Turkish officers, Sazonov did concur in this rationale.⁵⁰

The desire to limit German influence at the Straits was not the only matter on which British and Russian views coincided. Far from being relaxed about the prospect of Turkey purchasing South American dreadnoughts, the British government was eager to forestall this. Thus, when rumours began to circulate that Brazil intended to dispose of the *Rio de Janeiro*, the British government did not merely sit back like 'laissez-faire Liberals', to use McMeekin's phrase, and disclaim any ability to 'interfere with private business contracts';⁵¹ rather the Admiralty attempted, albeit behind the scenes, to

47 Limpus to Churchill, 12 March 1913, TNA, ADM 1/8927.

48 Mallet to Grey, 3 February 1914, TNA, ADM 1/8365/4.

49 Minute by Jackson, 10 February 1914, *ibid.* The ability of Vickers to see off foreign, especially German, competition was seen by the British government as one of their few effective assets in the battle for influence in the Ottoman Empire. Clive Trebilcock, *The Vickers Brothers: Armaments and Enterprise, 1854–1914* (London, 1977), pp. 121 and 124.

50 O'Beirne to Grey, 5 October 1910, TNA, FO 371/1015.

51 McMeekin, *Russian Origins*, p. 39.

influence the outcome. In the first instance, an attempt was made to halt the sale. Writing to Lord Rothschild, whose bank was handling the matter for Brazil, Winston Churchill, the first lord of the Admiralty, explained that Britain thought the 'best thing would be for the Brazilians not to sell the *Rio de Janeiro*'. His reason: 'Difficulties are caused when these great weapons are prepared in British yards for the use of foreign governments and then turned adrift on the world.' Accordingly, he made clear that Britain 'strongly deprecate[d] her sale to foreign governments'.⁵² Unfortunately, this none too subtle message failed to have the necessary effect. Hence, once it became clear that Brazil was determined to sell, the hostile attitude of the British government notwithstanding, Churchill sought to influence it in its choice of purchaser. Another letter was duly dispatched to Lord Rothschild, requesting him to inform the Brazilian authorities that 'First Lord of the Admiralty tells me that the new destination of the battleship *Rio de Janeiro* is a matter of concern to the British Admiralty. A sale to Greece however w[oul]d be quite unobjectionable to them.'⁵³ The clear implication that a sale to the Ottoman government would have been objectionable could hardly have been missed. Despite this, it had no effect: the *Rio de Janeiro* was sold to the Porte. Russia's alarm was noted in the Foreign Office. 'They may find it difficult to believe that H.M. government are powerless in the matter,' wrote Claud Russell, one of the clerks, 'but such seems to me to be the case.' Sir Eyre Crowe, the assistant undersecretary, concurred. Behind the scenes attempts to discourage the purchase had been made, he minuted, 'with the only result ... that the Turkish order was placed, and financial arrangements made to meet the cost, without [the British government's] knowledge'.⁵⁴ This hardly suggests duplicity to Russia.

As this examination of McMeekin's five Ottoman dreadnoughts hypothesis has shown, there are few grounds for attributing the outbreak of the First World War to Russian fears of a Turkish naval build-up. While it is true that, under British assistance, the Porte was modernizing its maritime forces, the results of this process had been far from startling by early 1914, the point at which, according to McMeekin, Russian alarm became a decisive factor. As for the size of the Turkish navy, it was certainly not about to be augmented by a slew of South American dreadnoughts. Nor did Russia have to worry about the reliability of its Entente partner. As the Russian government well knew, the British naval mission and British arms supplies were not primarily intended to undermine Russia's position in the Black Sea but to keep the Germans from gaining the commanding position at Constantinople that their commerce and military diplomacy might otherwise have accorded to them. Given that Russia had objected vociferously when a German was put in charge of the army corps garrisoned there, the prospect of a German admiral gaining influence over the navy as well would not have been appealing to St Petersburg. It certainly held few delights for London. This, rather than accusations of perfidious Albion, explains British policy.

52 Churchill to Rothschild, 15 August 1913, Cambridge, Churchill Archives Centre (CAC), CHAR 13/22A/163.

53 Churchill to Rothschild, 2 December 1913, CAC, CHAR 13/20/110.

54 Minutes by Russell and Crowe, 24 and 25 May 1914, TNA, FO 371/2114.

As for Russian policy, doubtless Sazonov wished to halt the shoring up of Ottoman power, but nothing that had occurred so far at Constantinople required a rush to war.⁵⁵ The expansion of Russian shipbuilding facilities in the Black Sea and a little patience would have been a more than adequate response, and both of these would have required several more years of peace.⁵⁶ Russia's decision in early 1914 to embark upon an expansion of its Black Sea naval shipbuilding programme, a decision that would not bear fruit for several years, would indicate that this point was well understood in St Petersburg.⁵⁷ In this regard, it is also telling that, when war did come in August 1914, Russia took no steps to widen the conflict to include the Ottoman Empire, as might have been expected under McMeekin's thesis. On the contrary, the fact that the fighting did ultimately spread to the Black Sea region was because the Ottoman Empire chose to strike against Russia. It is also notable that the Turkish leadership embarked upon this campaign not after the receipt of a new fleet of dreadnoughts, but after the acquisition of a solitary German battlecruiser. These facts place further question marks over McMeekin's belief that the balance of naval power in the Black Sea was decisive in the outbreak of the First World War.

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55 Westwood also points out that Russia was able to use its influence with Vickers to slow down the construction of the Turkish dreadnoughts, another potential means of influencing this situation that did not require a rush to war. See J.N. Westwood, *Russian Naval Construction, 1905–1945* (Basingstoke, 1994), p. 93.

56 The point is well made by Bobroff. See Bobroff, *Roads to Glory*, pp. 93–4.

57 Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War*, p. 348.