

Passage of the Black Sea Volunteer Fleet Through the Turkish Straits During the Russo-Japanese War (1904)

Rus-Japon Savaşı Esnasında Karadeniz Gönüllü Filosu'nun Türk Boğazlarından Geçişi (1904)

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Abstract

The regime of the Turkish Straits being internationally secured with the London Straits Treaty signed in 1841 failed to satisfy Russia that also wanted warships belonging to Black Sea riparian states to have the right of passage through the Straits. Russians tried to change this regime, however, the 1856 Paris and 1878 Berlin Treaties revealed that this status quo was to be preserved. In the meantime, the Russians that planned to take advantage of the changes in the world balance, realized that objectives regarding the Turkish Straits was related to the naval fleets in the Black Sea gaining strength. After the Berlin Treaty, Russians appealed for the warships they built in the Baltic Ports or purchased to be able to pass through the Turkish Straits unarmed, carrying civil personnel. Despite Britain's reaction, the Ottoman State issued permission for a limited number of warships to pass through its Straits on the condition that they abided by the trade regulations. In parallel with this, the Russians formed a "Volunteer Fleet" in the Black Sea with donation campaigns. The Black Sea Volunteer Fleet that consisted of vessels that could also be converted into warships when required, managed to pass through the Straits by concealing its mission until the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War. However, when ships that were a part of this fleet passed through the Straits, and inspected merchant vessels in and around the Red Sea during the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War, this attracted a strong reaction from Britain. Russians that did not have the power to confront the English were forced to withdraw and were unable to make such an attempt again. British Archive documents published under the title *British Documents of the Origins of the War (1898-1914)* and records of the House of Commons that will constitute the framework of this study that aims to examine international developments that occurred after these light warships, that were a part of the Black Sea Volunteer Fleet, passed through the Turkish Straits during the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War.

Key Words: Turkish Straits, Black Sea, Russian Black Sea Fleet, Russian Black Sea Volunteer Fleet, London Straits Convention.

Öz

Türk Boğazlarından geçiş rejiminin 1841 yılında imzalanan Londra Boğazlar Sözleşmesi ile uluslararası güvence altına alınması, Karadeniz'e kıyıdaş devletlere ait savaş gemilerinin de Boğazlardan geçme hakkına sahip olmasını isteyen Rusya'yı tatmin etmemişti. Ruslar bu rejimi değiştirmeye yönelik girişimlerde bulundular fakat 1856 Paris ve 1878 Berlin Antlaşmaları Boğazlarda statükonun muhafaza edileceğini göstermekteydi. Bu arada değişen dünya dengelerinden yararlanmayı planlayan Ruslar, Türk Boğazlarına yönelik hedeflerinin, Karadeniz'deki donanmalarının güçlenmesine bağlı olduğunu kavramışlardı. Berlin Antlaşması'ndan sonra Ruslar, Baltık limanlarında inşa ettikleri ya da satın aldıkları savaş gemilerini silahsız bir şekilde ve sivil personelle Türk Boğazlarından geçirebilmek için müracaatlarda bulundular. İngiltere'nin tepkilerine rağmen sınırlı sayıda savaş gemisinin ticari kriterlere tabi olmak kaydıyla Boğazlardan geçişine Osmanlı Devleti tarafından müsaade edildi. Bununla eş zamanlı olarak Ruslar, başış kampanyalarıyla Karadeniz'de sözde sivil amaçlı bir Gönüllü Filo meydana getirdiler. İhtiyaç halinde yardımcı savaş gemilerine dâhi dönüşebilecek potansiyele sahip gemilerden oluşan Karadeniz Gönüllü Filosu, 1904-1905 Rus-Japon Savaşı'na kadar misyonunu gizleyerek Boğazlardan geçti. Ancak 1904-1905 Rus-Japon Savaşı sırasında bu filoya bağlı gemilerin Boğazlardan geçerek Kızıldeniz ve çevresinde ticaret gemilerini denetlemesi İngiltere'nin şiddetli tepkisine neden oldu. İngiltere ile karşı karşıya gelecek güce sahip olmayan Ruslar geri adım atmak zorunda kaldılar ve bir daha da böyle bir teşebbüste bulunamadılar. *British Documents of the Origins of the War (1898-1914)* başlığıyla yayımlanan İngiliz Arşiv belgeleri ve Avam Kamarası tutanaklarının iskeletini oluşturacağı bu çalışma 1904-1905 Rus-Japon Savaşı sırasında Karadeniz Gönüllü Filosu'na bağlı hafif savaş gemilerin misyonlarını gizleyerek Türk Boğazlarından geçişi ve sonrasında yaşanan uluslararası gelişmeleri incelemeyi hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türk Boğazları, Karadeniz, Rus Karadeniz Filosu, Rus Karadeniz Gönüllü Filosu, Londra Boğazlar Sözleşmesi.

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Introduction

Since the end of the 20th century, taking into consideration the change in the balance of power in the world, the Russians began to pursue the passage of their military grade vessels of a class, type or category that was not specifically identified in international agreements¹ through the Turkish Straits. Agreements concerning the Straits that failed to provide the exact criteria of ship passage, or the legal gaps in these agreements for that matter offered the Russians a suitable opportunity to expand their naval fleets in the Black Sea and challenge the status quo. Almost ten years after the Berlin Treaty (1878), that protected the status quo of the Straits, the Russians appealed to the relevant Ottoman offices in an effort for their unarmed ships that were a part of their fleet to pass through the Straits. On this basis, in June 1888 an unarmed Russian vessel named *Zabiaka* was allowed to pass through the Straits for the first time. On permission of Abdulhamid II, during 1890-1891 Russia carried unarmed forces and prisoners to the Far East with their unarmed warships that sailed through the Straits. The British, that also became involved, considered it necessary to warn both the Ottoman State and the Russians emphasizing that they could also take advantage of these privileges. After bilateral negotiations with Russia, the Ottoman Government that hesitated for a while after this warning and even prevented the ships in question from passing through the Straits for a while, announced that they would give permission for transits of this kind on the condition that they gave the necessary information in advance.²

Despite the partial concessions of the Ottoman State, the Russians were secretly preparing crucial plans with the aim of seizing the Turkish Straits. In this context, the plan prepared by Nelidov in 1896 failed to materialize because Russia did not have sufficient naval forces; operational obstacles and because this could lead to a major war in Europe. As a result, towards the end of the 19th century the Russians realized that they would have to expand their Black Sea Fleet and made necessary preparations.³

In 1902, the Russians held negotiations for the purpose of adding the four torpedo-boats they built in Petersburg to their fleet in the Black Sea via the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Strait. On 19 September 1902, Abdulhamid II gave permission for these boats to pass the Straits on the condition that they flew a commercial flag and complied with the regulations applicable to merchant ships; that the boats passed separately with a twenty-four hour interval and did not carry a naval crew or arms. Under these conditions, these vessels began to pass through the Straits. Almost a week before the last vessel was to pass, British Ambassador N. O'Connor

¹ The London Straits Convention signed in 1841, stipulated the passage of commercial vessels through the Straits during times of peace, and the ban on the passage of warships continued. Only light warships that served the embassies of ally states were allowed to pass through the straits. In the time of war, the Ottoman Empire reserved the right to open the Straits to the fleets of ally states. Indeed, during the Crimean War, the allied fleets that passed the Straits assisted the Ottoman Empire, as a result, with the signing of the Treaty of Paris (1856) the Black Sea was closed to all warships and dockyards. However, the restrictions were lifted with the signing of the London Convention Regarding the Black Sea on the request of the Russians that were taking advantage of the changing balance of power in the world. Therefore, although the Russians once again became a treat for the Turkish Straits, the only consolation for the Ottoman Empire was that in the time of peace, they gained the right to open the Straits for the warships belonging to ally states. The London Straits Convention (1841); Treaty of Paris and Paris Straits Treaty (30 March 1856); London Convention on the Black Sea (1871); Nihat Erim, *Devletlerarası Hukuku ve Siyasi Tarih Metinleri (Osmanlı İmparatorluğu Andlaşmaları)* I, Ankara, 1953, pp. 309-313, 347, 355-356, 367-368.

² The memorandum presented by Charles Hardinge, *British Documents of the Origins of the War (1898-1914) (BDOW)*, *The Anglo-Russian Rapprochement (1903-1907)*, vol. IV, London, 1929, No. 55, pp. 58-60; Y. Hikmet Bayur, "Boğazlar Sorununun Bir Evresi (1906-1914)", *Bellekten*, vol. VII, No. 28, 1943, pp. 104-105; Cemal Tukin, *Boğazlar Meselesi*, Istanbul, 1999, pp. 362-403.

³ John Burman, *Britain's Relations with the Ottoman Empire During the Embassy of Sir Nicholas O'Connor to the Porte, 1898-1908*, Istanbul, 2010, p. 96.

presented a memorandum to the Ottoman Government stating that the treaty obligations had been violated and that in the future they would also take advantage of the same privileges.⁴ Despite this, the torpedo boat continued towards the Dardanelles Strait and indications of low-key tension between Russia, Britain and the Ottoman State was clearly evident.

The Austria-Hungary Minister of Foreign Affairs Count Goluchowski, who aimed to take advantage of any potential tension between Britain, Russia and the Ottoman State, intervened in the issue of the passage through the Straits. Goluchowski, who informed the Ottoman State on 9 January 1903 that there were no objections regarding the Russian warship passing through the Bosphorus Strait, toned down these views somewhat and conveyed this to the British Ambassador F. R. Plunkett. Although Goluchowski alleges that he submitted this proposal for the purpose of inquiring whether or not the Padishah would give such permission in the scope of a friendly and allied country, the British Ambassador stressed that they would certainly not support such a proposal that could lead to disputes regarding the status quo in the Mediterranean. It is clear that Austria's interests were not limited to those between Russia and Britain, but also targeted gaining an advantage in the already existing Macedonia issue. The British Ambassador was aware of the seriousness of the situation, and subtly warned Austria to withdraw its attempts stating that "this inopportune appeal would have a serious impact in London."⁵ The British were receiving information that not only Austria-Hungary, but also Italy was to support Russia on this issue. However, the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Prinetti not only stood beside Britain, he also warned the Austria-Hungary Ambassador that a proposal that meant isolating Britain would "lead to unfavorable results."⁶ As for Prinetti, he announced that they would join the protests against Britain, and even implied that he believed they would be able to convince Austria in this respect.⁷

As in the case of the Macedonian issue, the British were expecting the Austrian Government to publically reveal that they shared the same opinion by protesting against the Ottoman Government. Whereas Goluchowski not only stressed that they did not want the regime of the Turkish Straits passage to change, but were not in favor of a joint protest for these kinds of issues (the passage of small unarmored Russian war boats) that were not significant to the extent where these could be compared with the Macedonian issue. In response to the British Ambassador's reminder that "this will create an unfavorable impact in London", Goluchowski was forced to give a diplomatic reply saying they would investigate the issue once again.⁸ In the meantime, learning that the Russians assured the Ottoman Government that the passage in question would not violate the existing agreements and that the Ottomans approved on 7 January 1903, increased the concern of the British even further.⁹

On 14 January 1903, the British Ambassador to Istanbul N. O'Connor announced that the night before, a Russian torpedo boat passed through the Bosphorus Strait non-stop to the Black Sea.¹⁰ However, neither Austria nor Italy had warned the Ottoman Government regarding Britain's intention, and the British Government was hoping that this would materialize as soon as possible.¹¹ Without igniting the issue even further, the British who realized that they would

⁴ The Straits and The Russian Volunteer Fleet, 1903-1904, *BDOW*, vol. IV, p. 41; Tukin, *Ibid.*, pp. 362-403.

⁵ From F. R. Plunkett to Lansdowne 9 January 1903, *BDOW*, vol. IV, no. 22, p. 43.

⁶ From R. Rodd to Lansdowne 10/17 January 1903, *BDOW*, vol. IV, No. 34, pp. 44-46.

⁷ From R. Rodd to Lansdowne 9/15 January 1903, *BDOW*, vol. IV, No. 32, pp. 41-42.

⁸ F.R.Plunkett to Lansdowne 9/19 January 1904, *BDOW*, vol. IV, No. 33, pp. 43-44.

⁹ Response from the Russian Minister for Foreign Affairs Comte Lamsdorff to the Ottoman Ambassador in Petersburg issued on 8 January 1904. From Whitehead to Lansdowne 26 January/2 February and 5 February 1903, *BDOW*, vol. IV, No. 37-38-39, pp. 47-48.

¹⁰ N. O'Connor to Lansdowne 4 January 1903, *BDOW*, vol. IV, no. 35, p. 46.

¹¹ Lansdowne to R.Rodd, 15 January 1903, *BDOW*, vol. IV, no. 36, p. 46.

not gain the support they sought and did not want to risk confrontation with Russia, decided to back down and displayed no further reaction after the diplomatic note they initially presented to the Ottoman Government. Nevertheless, disputes concerning the Russian military warships passing through the Bosphorus Straits during the Russo-Japanese War that broke out almost a year later, was to occupy the order of events even more critically.

Britain's Approach to the Issue of the Straits During the Russo-Japanese War

While the British that waived the policy of isolation at the beginning of the 20th century signed bilateral treaties with the Japanese in an attempt of maintaining the status quo in the Far-East on one hand, due to the mutual threat on the other began to establish relations with the French. Although the Russian Government that aimed to take advantage of the situation attempted to form an alliance with the British based on the "Turkey issue", this attempt failed. Indeed, while the relations and agreements between the Great Powers during this process affected the Ottoman State's position in the international system in different ways, the geopolitical importance of the Straits was increasing with every day that passed.¹² Again, there was speculation that in the case of a potential war Russia, that was experiencing problems with Japan during this period, would attempt to send the Black Sea Volunteer Fleet through the Straits with the aim of providing logistic support. This issue received widespread interest particularly in the British press; on one hand it was claimed that Russia was pressuring the Ottoman Government to pay the remaining compensation from the Berlin Treaty, while on the other was attempting to secure passage on the Straits for its warships by pledging to assist in maintaining the status quo in the Balkans.¹³ Eventually, when the war broke out with Japan on 8 February 1904, in terms of the Russians the passage of the Black Sea Volunteer Fleet was to gain even more importance and they were to seek a formula where they could accomplish this.

Since the early days of the Russo-Japanese War, news that the Russian Government would submit a request with the aim of allowing the passage of the Black Sea Volunteer Fleet through the Straits was one of the main topics in the House of Commons. However, the British Government thought Russia would not "make an attempt of such that meant openly violating the commitments of the treaty against the European powers."¹⁴

Japan that was at war with Russia, was now involved in the disputes regarding the passage of the Straits. Shortly before the war broke out, the Japanese Minister for Foreign Affairs held officials meetings with the British Minister for Foreign Affairs Lansdowne in an attempt of learning Britain's position if a war did break out with Russia and the Russian Black Sea Fleet managed to pass through the Straits. While Lansdowne emphasized that if Russia violated the agreements concerning the Straits they would certainly deal with the issue with the other great states, he also alleged that there were no signs indicating this¹⁵ and also avoided making any official commitment.

With the beginning of the Russo-Japanese War, there was also a rise in negotiations among the other great powers. The situation of Russia was discussed during the Entente Cordiale negotiations aimed at establishing an alliance especially between Britain and France. During and after these negotiations, the French adopted policies for the reconciliation of the two states to strengthen the alliance they established with Britain by also incorporating Russia.

¹² Burman, *Ibid.* pp. 22, 94.

¹³ Hasip Saygılı, *1905 Rus Devriminde Sultan Abdülhamid*, Istanbul, 2016, pp. 73-74.

¹⁴ Accessed: 2 June 2020, Russia and the Dardanelles, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1904/feb/10/russia-and-the-dardanelles> (*Records from the British House of Commons*)

¹⁵ One of the most influential Russian admirals, Admiral of the Red Sea Fleet Skrydloff was called to Petersburg for talks regarding the operation in the Pacific. From Lansdowne to MacDonald 30 January 1904.; From C. Scott to Lansdowne 4/8 February 1904, *BDOW*, vol. IV, No. 40-41, pp. 48-49

Nevertheless, British diplomats realized that such an alliance mainly depended on the approval of the demands of Russia, that was at war with Japan during that period, regarding their passage of the Russian warships through the Straits and emphasized that they would never make concessions regarding this issue. So emphasizing that such an agreement would not be possible, Lansdowne insisted that they would definitely not tolerate the violation of the Straits agreements and passage of the Russian fleet through the Straits for the purpose of attacking their allies in the Far-East, and that if such an event occurred they would take the necessary measures. Although they refrained from an agreement regarding the integrity of the Ottoman territories,¹⁶ maintaining the status quo of the Straits was still one of the “redlines” in terms of the British. Furthermore, to prevent Japan, that was “classified as an ally” by the British, from experiencing hardship, the Straits had to be closed to the Russian warships.¹⁷ How the Ottoman Government would deal with such a situation was a matter of great concern. This was put to test with the British vessel *Nemesis* that headed towards the Straits simultaneously with the ongoing disputes concerning the Russian warships.

British War Vessel *Nemesis*' Attempt to Pass Through to the Black Sea and Stance of the Ottoman Government

During the period when there were ongoing disputes concerning the possibility of Russia violating the agreements regarding the Straits, the British vessel *Nemesis* carrying two Hotchkiss canons on its deck, sailed to the mouth of the Dardanelles. On 22 May 1904, *Nemesis*¹⁸ was stopped at the entrance to the Dardanelles on the grounds that the vessel was carrying these canons. The Grand Vizier informed O'Connor that *Nemesis* would only be allowed to pass through the Straits if the canons were removed from the vessel. Accepting these conditions, O'Connor issued the necessary instructions to the personnel of the ship. After complying with these conditions regarding the passage of the vessel, the British sent a memorandum to the Ottoman Government stating they expected these conditions would also apply to ships belonging to all the states.¹⁹

The British Minister for Foreign Affairs began to monitor the Ottoman Government's approach closely regarding the passage of vessels through the Straits. Lansdowne stated that the procedures imposed on *Nemesis* was an indication that the obligations of the agreements concerning the Straits would be respected, and that from now on they expected that armed vessels from all other states requesting passage would be dealt with in the same way.²⁰ It appears that in view of the timing of the *Nemesis* incident and the British Government's approach regarding this issue, they wanted to put a message over regarding the existing agreements. Even if this was not organized and was simply a coincidence, the British Government had the opportunity to indirectly warn the Ottoman Government. Indeed, when allegations that the Black Sea Volunteer Fleet was to sail through the Straits became more serious a short while after this incident, not the British alone but also the Japanese were greatly concerned.

¹⁶ Although Abdulhamid II proposed an alliance based on defense after Entente Cordial, the British rejected this proposal. Burman, *Ibid.* pp. 101-103.

¹⁷ Lansdowne to E. Monson, 29 April 1904, *BDOW*, vol. IV, no. 43, p. 50.

¹⁸ Although choosing the name *Nemesis* meaning Goddess of Revenge in Greek mythology bears great significance, we were unable to find any indication that this name, or in fact that the passage of the vessel was a conscious attempt to convey a message to Russia.

¹⁹ Because the instructions were delayed, the *Nemesis* vessel was kept waiting at the mouth of the Straits for three days. From N. O'Connor to Lansdowne 29 May 1904, *BDOW*, vol. IV, no. 46, p. 51.

²⁰ Lansdowne to N. O'Connor 7 June 1904, *BDOW*, vol. IV, no. 44, p. 50.

Allegations of the Japanese Before the Russian Warships Passed Through the Straits

On 4 June 1904, the Japanese Minister for Foreign Affairs that met with the British Ambassador Plunkett in Vienna claimed that according to a secret report he received from Petersburg, the Russian Government submitted a request to the Ottoman Government on 25 April 1904 for the passage of the Black Sea Fleet to the Mediterranean Sea. Moreover, the Japanese alleged that the Ottoman Government gave an uncommitted response that they would not object if this operation was carried out under the initiative of the Russians and in secrecy. In fact, the Japanese also said the Russian Chief Commander issued instructions for a first class battle cruiser, two gunships and a destroyer to be prepared. The Japanese Minister for Foreign Affairs wanted to learn whether or not measures would be taken to prevent such an operation. Nevertheless, Plunkett refrained from giving an official response, and simply sufficed in declaring that he was sure that Britain would take the necessary measures.²¹

Upon these allegations by the Japanese, O'Connor announced that since the passage of the Russian torpedo ship in January 1903, the Ottoman Minister for Foreign Affairs had not received any such request and that the government was fully aware of the obligations arising from the international agreements. On the other hand, as the British Consul General in Odessa indicated, O'Connor suspected that the ships referred to by the Japanese were the *Petersburg* and *Smolensk* vessels, a part of the Black Sea Volunteer Fleet that were armored and waiting for passage to the sea.²²

In the copy of the Daily Mail dated 11 June 1904, news that the Ottoman Government allowed two Russian cruisers and four warships to pass through the Straits was published. And although the Ottoman Government rejected these claims three days later,²³ the Russians accelerated preparations so the *Petersburg* and *Smolensk* vessels, the ships predicted by O'Connor could pass through the Straits.

Passage of the *Petersburg* and *Smolensk* of the Black Sea Volunteer Fleet Through the Straits

The Black Sea Volunteer Fleet that was formed in Odessa after the 1877-1878 Ottoman-Russian War, and supported with donation campaigns was initially controlled by the Ministry of Finance and later by the Ministry of the Navy. Ships that were a part of the Volunteer Fleet that had the capacity of carrying out oversea operations were designed so they could be converted into auxiliary warships, hospitals, stores and transportation ships during the time of war. This fleet, whose personnel consisted of retired or reserve naval officers, was governed according to naval regulations, instructions and discipline. Until the Russo-Japanese War, the Volunteer Fleet carried cargo and passengers between the Black Sea and the Far East.²⁴ However, when the war broke out with Japan, the Russians took steps for the Volunteer Fleet to sail from the Black Sea to provide logistic support.

When the request for the ships from the Black Sea Volunteer Fleet to pass through the Straits, was submitted the Ottoman Ambassador in Petersburg Hüsni Pasha attempted to get an official guarantee from Lamsdorff, Russian Minister for Foreign Affairs that this fleet would not carry out any tasks other than the purpose given. After speaking with the Tsar, Lamsdorff gave verbal assurance that the vessels requesting passage through the Straits were simply a part

²¹ F. R. Plunkett to Lansdowne 5 June 1904, *BDOW*, vol. IV, no. 45, p. 51.

²² N. O'Connor to Lansdowne 8 June 1904, *BDOW*, vol. IV, no. 47, p. 52.

²³ Ed. Note, 8 June 1904, *BDOW*, vol. IV, p. 52.

²⁴ Patrick J. Rollins, "Russian Commerce Raiders in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, *Naval War College Review*, vol. 47, No.3 1994 Summer, p.89.

of the volunteer fleet. But the Ottoman Government insisted on written assurance.²⁵ The However, the Russians not only avoided giving any written commitment, but in the case of the Ottoman Government delaying their reply they also threatened that the volunteer ships would pass through the Straits without complying with any of the regulations. Upon this, the Ottoman Government withdrew their request of written assurance and attempted to receive a verbal declaration from the Russian Ambassador that the vessels in question would fly the commercial flag that was routine practice; that the vessels would not be carrying arms or ammunitions; would sail at a distance from one another so one would not pass through the Bosphorus Strait until the other ship had exited the Dardanelles, and that the vessels would not be converted in cruisers.²⁶ But the Russian refused to accept these conditions. As a result, although the Ottoman Government authorized passage of the vessels, with the intervention of Sultan Abdulhamid II the government was to turn a blind eye to the Russian vessels passing the Straits without receiving any official assurance.²⁷ Despite support for Japan among the Ottoman public due to these historical issues and conflict with the Russians, this decision issued by Abdulhamid II should be analyzed taking into consideration the conjuncture of that period.²⁸

On 8 June 1904, on approval of Grand Duke Alexander Alexandrovich, the Russian Navy Minister Admiral F. K. Avelan issued instructions to Ivan Skalsky and Victor Troyan, captains of *Petersburg* and *Smolensk* to carry out an operation by sailing from the Straits to the Mediterranean, and onto the Red Sea via the Suez Canal. The reason for this order was that Russia had concealed weapons and ammunition in secret compartments of these vessels that were apparently equipped to transport coal to its fleet in the Far East. The *Petersburg* that departed from Sevastopol at 07:00 on the morning of 3 July 1904, reached Istanbul at 15:00 the following afternoon.²⁹ The intelligence organization in Istanbul that also consisted of Japanese merchants observed the passage of these vessels and reported this immediately.³⁰ The Russian Ambassador to Istanbul requested that measures be taken in case of potential sabotages that could be carried out by the Japanese intelligence organization, so the Ottoman Government issued the necessary instructions to both the port masters and patrol vessels to ensure the safety and safe passage of these ships through the Straits.³¹

The *Petersburg* and *Smolensk* Vessels of the Black Sea Volunteer Fleet Beginning Controls After Passing Through the Suez Canal

The *Petersburg*, that sailed to Port Said on 7 July 1904 then onto the Red Sea via the Suez Canal the next day, was followed at a two day interval by *Smolensk*. While these vessels

²⁵ The British received this information almost a month later. N. O'Connor to Lansdowne 4/5 Augusts 1904, *BDOW*, vol. IV, no. 48, pp. 52-53.

²⁶ N. O'Connor to Lansdowne 8/9 August 1904, *BDOW*, vol. IV, no. 49, p. 53.

²⁷ Ziya Şakir, *Sultan Abdülhamid ve Mikado*, Istanbul, 1994, p.119; F. Şayan Ulusan Şahin, "Rus-Japon Harbi (1904-1905)'nin Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'ndaki Tesirleri", *Kırıkkale Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, Issue. 2, (1999), pp. 271-275.

²⁸ Hüseyin Hilmi Aladağ, "Osmanlı Devleti Zaviyesinden 1904-1905 Rus-Japon Harbi", *Selçuk Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi*, Issue. 36, 2016, p. 588.

²⁹ Rollins, *Ibid.* pp. 92-93.

³⁰ Another claim was that the vessels in question together with 7 vessels from the Volunteer Fleet passed through the Straits unarmed and joined the Ferikerzam division of the Russian Baltic Fleet close to Crete where these vessels were armed with the help of Greece. These may have received reinforcements from Greece, but if the vessels in question were to pass through the Straits unarmed then there was no reason for the Russians to persist in getting passage permission from the Ottoman Government. Moreover, there is only official correspondence regarding the *Smolensk* and *Petersburg* passing the Straits and carrying out operations. For more detailed information see. Selçuk Esenbel, *Japon Modernleşmesi ve Osmanlı, Japonya'nın Türk Dünyası ve İslam Politikaları*, İstanbul, 2012.

³¹ Ayhan Kuşçuluo, *Japon-Rus Savaşı ve Türkler*, Erciyes Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Kayseri, 2009, p. 78.

operated under the customary commercial flag during their passage of the Straits they apparently complying with the necessary procedures, but were actually concealing their real mission. When they reached the Suez, Captain Skalsky who was manning the vessels made contact with local secret agents of the Volunteer Fleet, and conveyed the updated contraband list and other necessary information in order to provide logistic support to the Russian forces in the Far East. When these Russian vessels that were armed like cruisers entered the Red Sea, they took position then began duty on 11 July. *Smolensk* was to take up position close to the Zubayr Island while *Petersburg* was positioned to the south of the Zukur Island, almost a hundred miles apart. As soon as the vessels reached their positions, they patrolled the area and began to stop and inspect merchant ships. Post and cargo that was bound for Japan was examined with the aim of preventing logistic support to the enemy and when necessary was confiscated. It was decided that vessels seized carrying contraband would be sent to the Libau (Liepaia, Latvia) Port in the Baltic, almost 5.300 miles from the Red Sea as the pillage of war. During the time the vessels remained in the Red Sea and the shores of Africa, sixteen British, one German, one Dutch and the one Norway flagged ships, a total of nineteen merchant vessels were stopped and inspected by the Russian vessels. The Russians that were preparing to send three of these bound for Japan that were seized as the pillage of war to Libau, were confronted with the severe pressure and harsh approach of the British.³²

Reaction of the British Government and Warnings Regarding Complying with the Passage Regime of the Turkish Straits

On the day the Russian ships began operations in the Red Sea, 11 July 1904, Charles Dilke in the British House of Commons raised the issue of claims that a British post ship was recently stopped by a Russian vessel in the Red Sea, and demanded information regarding this. On behalf of the government, Earl Percy explained that they had no knowledge of this, but in February 1904 two vessels owned by the Peninsula and Oriental Company and a vessel from the India Steamship Company were stopped by the Russian fleet in the Red Sea, and shortly after examining the documents, the Russians that boarded the vessel gave permission to continue the voyage. Based on this example that occurred in February, the British Government particularly indicated that there was no need to object to these routine inspections by the warships.³³ But when ships that passed the Straits disguised as commercial vessels began to carry out these kinds of inspections, this was to take the issue to a much different dimension and was classified as a violation of the regulations.

In a few days, substantial information regarding the inspections of the Russian vessels that took position in the Red Sea and occasionally patrolled the Indian Ocean, Cape of Hope and the African shores was raised in the House of Commons. On 14 July 1904, Brotherton requested information concerning a Russian cruiser that sailed through the Straits flying the merchant flag, stopping two British vessels in the Red Sea and demanded to be informed of what kind of action was taken. The British Government accepted that two of its vessels were stopped, but claimed that they had no official information that the Russian vessels passed the Straits under a merchant flag and that the investigation was still continuing.³⁴ It was almost impossible for the British Government that had a vast intelligence network,³⁵ not to have

³² If the vessels in question were not sent to Libua they were to be destroyed. Rollins, *Ibid.*, pp. 93-98.

³³ Accessed: 2 June 2020, Stoppage of British Mail Steamers by Russian Warships, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/sittings/1904/jul/11>

³⁴ Accessed: 3 June 2020, Passage of the Bosphorus by armed Russian Cruiser-British Ships stopped in the Red Sea, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/sittings/1904/jul/14>

³⁵ O'Connor formed a group among the shipping merchants to monitor the movements of the warships in the Black Sea ports. If these merchants noticed unusual movement they would report this to London immediately. Burman, *Ibid.*, p. 59.

knowledge of this issue conveyed by the Japanese; that was given wide coverage in the press and raised by parliamentarians. All the statements indicated that the British Government had not yet decided on its reaction towards the Russians and were in fact trying to buy time. At this stage, in all likelihood the British Government opted to hide the issue from the House of Commons and the public.

Although the British Government refrained from giving any information, Laurie demanded that the House of Commons announced whether or not the vessel that inspected or controlled the British ships in the Red Sea and vicinity was the *Petersburg* that passed the Straits under a commercial flag. In addition, it appeared that an explanation was necessary as to whether the conversion of the merchant ship in this way was in compliance with international law. Eventually, the government confessed that this issue was vitally important to them; that due to the lack of information the investigation was ongoing and that they would answer these questions at a later date. This statement was nothing more than a tactic the British resorted to in response to the persistent questions. This strategy used by the government in an attempt of delaying a response³⁶ would not prevent parliamentarians questioning this issue, on the contrary, in the light of new information they were also to seek answers to various other questions on the topic.

During 19-21 July 1904, Younger reported that the British vessel named *Dragoman*, and Thomas Dewar reported that the *Menelaus* and *Crew Hall* vessels were stopped in the Red Sea, and in view of this questioned whether or not any official complaint was made regarding this. The three ships in question were among those that were stopped on 11 July in the Red Sea, searched and later released. Therefore, it was clear that although more than a week had passed since the Russians stopped these vessels, the British Government did not want to give and implement a rash decision, but were still assessing what their response should be towards the Russians.³⁷

The British Government delaying the investigation by avoiding issuing a statement generated serious concerns in the House of Commons. At this point, Gibson Bowles questioned whether or not the British vessel and its personnel being forcibly searched or being subjected to control by the Russians was based on the Suez Canal Treaty. In response to criticisms, Prime Minister Balfour claimed that certain issues were due to international law while some were concerning the canal in particular. But because this issue was extremely sensitive due to its political nature, this could lead to a change in the balance of world powers. Particularly emphasizing that they were certainly not underestimating the issue, Balfour explained that as they were not at war with Russia, controls of this kind by warships could not be prevented and that they were trying to calm down the reactions.³⁸ The actual problem is that the vessels being searched were not warships.

Another issue concerning the Russian vessels was that they confiscated postal packets. Gibson Bowles raised the subject in the House of Commons and questioned whether they were to appeal to the Hague Court of Justice in connection with the British postal vessel called *Persia* that was searched by the crew of the *Smolensk* and detained for almost an entire day, and the German post vessel named *Prinz Heinrich* that was searched and its post and cargo bound for

³⁶ Accessed: 3 June 2020, Russian Warships and British Vessels in the Red Sea, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/sittings/1904/jul/18>

³⁷ Accessed: 3 June 2020, British Ships stopped by Russian Cruisers in the Red Sea, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/sittings/1904/jul/19>; Detention of British Ships by Russian Cruiser, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/sittings/1904/jul/21>

³⁸ On the other hand, the British Government maintained that vessels sailing through the Suez Canal or their shipment could not be seized as a legitimate pillage. Accessed: 4 June 2020, Russian Volunteer Fleet-Captures of British Steamers - Passage through Suez Canal, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/sittings/1904/jul/25>

Japan confiscated. But Balfour was experienced enough to know that legal action of this kind would not get results.³⁹ Furthermore, at that time there was no international binding agreement preventing the confiscation of post or cargo.⁴⁰

Initially, the British Government believed that as in the past if the Russian vessels passed the Turkish Straits by taking advantage of shortcomings in the legal system or by violating the regulations, they would be able to achieve their goals by pressuring the Ottoman Government. Moreover, adopting a similar approach during the incident that occurred in January 1903, the British Government opted to send a diplomatic letter to the Ottoman Government, therefore avoiding a direct confrontation with Russia. But now the case was totally different. Until 1904, the British were not directly affected by violations that occurred during the passage of the Turkish Straits. This time the situation was different and the British interests were directly under threat. Moreover, the reaction of the House of Commons and the press also involved the public in this process. Despite this, the British Government acted with caution and wanted to reach a sensible, reasonable decision.⁴¹

Contrary to their expectations, the more the British Government remained silent the reaction of the public increased even further. Claims that the Ottoman Government and Russia had reached a secret agreement regarding the passage of the vessels in question through the Turkish Straits worsened the situation. The British Government was almost certain that the Ottoman Government had not come to such an agreement with Russia.⁴² Nevertheless, there was also the reality of the way in which the vessels in question sailed through the Straits and behind the scenes this was constantly questioned. In view of this, it was necessary to reach the root of the problem and put an end to this permanently.

Eventually, when the *Petersburg* seized the vessel belonging to the P&O Company called *Malacca* on 13 July 1904, the British Government, that refrained from publically reacting to operations of Russian vessels that continued for almost two weeks lost all patience. After *Malacca* that was carrying small pieces of artillery and a large quantity of ammunition to the British bases in Hong Kong was searched, the vessel was taken to the Algiers. On 20 July 1904, the British Government presented a formal protest against Russia via its Ambassador Charles Hardinge. Admitting that the status of the vessels of the Volunteer Fleet was unclear, the British Government emphasized that these were not categorized as warships on the grounds that if this was the case, it would be impossible for the vessels to receive permission from the Turks to passage the Straits. In addition, it was emphasized that the British naval supplies were not categorized as contraband and that some parts of *Malacca* was ravaged in a manner contrary to international law, that if the vessel in question was taken to a Russian port then the British navy would not abstain from using force to prevent this. The British not only issued this warning, but also moved its entire fleet consisting of twelve warships, two cruisers, two destroyers and one admiral's yacht to follow the Russian ships and rescue the British vessels seized by the Russians. In view of the reactions, Alexander Benckendorf accepted that this was a mistake and said he would give instructions for *Malacca* to be released immediately. Assurance from the Russian Government that they would not insist the volunteer vessels were deployed as cruisers until the general principles were specified and therefore would not carry out operations of this

³⁹ Accessed: 5 June 2020, Russian Cruisers -Passage through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/sittings/1904/jul/25>

⁴⁰ The proposal of the Memorandum Relative to Postal Correspondence on High Seas was to be presented by the Germans in 1907 at The Hague, but the Russians refused to join in this agreement. Rollins, *Ibid*, p.107. footnote no24.

⁴¹ Accessed: 5 June 2020, Russian Cruisers and the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Passage, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/sittings/1904/jul/26>

⁴² Accessed: 6 June 2020, Passage of the Dardanelles by Vessels of Russian Volunteer Fleet, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/sittings/1904/jul/27>

kind, and a request that they ignored this incident had ever occurred was classified sufficient by the British.⁴³ In response to British pressure, the Russian Government issued a formal agreement that the volunteer vessels would never carry weapons for the wrong purposes; they would continue operating under a commercial flag and would not convert these vessels into warships. Therefore, the guarantee the Ottoman Government demanded from the very beginning was secured under British pressure.⁴⁴ On 21 July, Admiral Avelan issued instructions to cease the operation. Russian vessels that continued to patrol for a significantly long time after this on the grounds that they had not received the order, were captured by the British cruiser called *Forte* when they dropped anchor in the Menai Bay on 6 September 1904. The captain of *Forte* that delivered the order of the naval ministers, expected the Russians to follow the order.⁴⁵

The *Petersburg* that set out from Menai Bay on 8 September 1904 reached Libau on 10 October, and *Smolensk* three days later on 13 October.⁴⁶ In the meantime, statements that the Tsar issued an order for *Smolensk* and *Petersburg* to be renamed *Rion* and *Dniepr* and join the Russian fleet began to appear in the press.⁴⁷

Shortly before the Russian vessels reached Libau, the British Government held talks with the Ottoman Government with the aim of preventing incidents of this kind. On 5 October 1904, the British Government informed the Ottoman Government that in the future they expected the Russian Volunteer Fleet to comply with the regulations during passage through the Turkish Straits.⁴⁸

Information was received that upon reaching Libau, the *Smolensk* and *Petersburg* were to set sail again, as cruisers. It became clear that this information source,⁴⁹ that was also confirmed by the British military attaché in Petersburg, was the Japanese. Taking these allegations even further, Viscount Hayashi claimed that they received unconfirmed information that the Russian Black Sea Fleet was to pass the Straits. However, on this occasion these allegations were false. Moreover, Lansdowne was almost sure that after all that had happened, the Russians would not dare to attempt this.⁵⁰ And after receiving open support from the British, the Ottoman Government was more careful and closely monitored the passage of merchant ships.⁵¹

In the meantime, although Abdulhamid II attempted to obtain assistance from the British by emphasizing the threat he described with the metaphor “protection from the attack of the wounded Russian bear”, he failed to receive the support he expected.⁵² After all, within a few years the problems between France, Russia and England were pared down to minimal level and these countries formed the Triple Entente Alliance.

⁴³ Feridun Cemal Erkin, *Türk Sovyet İlişkileri ve Boğazlar Meselesi*, Ankara, 1968, pp.39-40; Rollins, *Ibid*, pp. 98-100; Accessed: 6 June 2020, Russian Seizures of British Ships, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/sittings/1904/jul/28>; Russian Seizures of British Ships-The Case of the "Malacca; <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/sittings/1904/aug/08>;

⁴⁴ Accessed: 6 June 2020, Russia and Contraband of War, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/sittings/1904/aug/11>; Tukin, *Ibid*, p. 404.

⁴⁵ Rollins, *Ibid*, pp. 98-102.

⁴⁶ Rollins, *Ibid*, p. 102.

⁴⁷ C Hardinge to Lansdowne 7/14 November 1904, *BDOW*, vol. IV, no. 53, p. 56.

⁴⁸ Townley to Lansdowne 28 October/1 November 1904, memorandum dated 5 November 1904 to the Ottoman Government, *BDOW*, vol. IV, no. 50, pp. 53-54.

⁴⁹ Lansdowne to E. Monson 15 November 1904, *BDOW*, vol. IV, no. 54, pp. 56-57.

⁵⁰ Lansdowne to C. MacDonald 16 November 1904, *BDOW*, vol. IV, no. 55, p. 57.

⁵¹ Tukin, *Ibid*, pp. 408-409.

⁵² In July 1904, Abdulhamid II tried to obtain assurance of this kind from O'Connor on the condition that this would remain confidential. Burner, *Ibid*. p. 112.

Conclusion

After the 1878 Berlin Treaty, Russians attempted to include the light warships they either built or purchased in the Baltic ports to their Black Sea Fleet and Volunteer Fleet by passing these through the Turkish Straits disguised as commercial vessels. In practice, Abdulhamid II, who established close relations with Germany due to the policies adopted by the British, authorized the passage of light warships with the intention of avoiding confrontation with Russia on the condition that they complied with the regulations implemented for commercial vessels. Quite naturally we can suggest that behind this approach were the conflict of the Russian and British interests and plan of gaining British support. In addition, we should also acknowledge that assessments in the policy of objectiveness and balance were the main motivation in these practices.

However, the British not only opposed a revision in the regime of the Straits passage, but due to the changes in the balance of world powers also avoided any direct confrontation with Russia. The British also refused to give Abdulhamid II the support he expected. Moreover, Britain was putting pressure on the Ottoman Government for the Russians to comply with the regime of the Straits passage. This continued until the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War. Nevertheless, the Russian vessels that passed through the Turkish Straits and then the Suez Canal disguised as commercial vessels during the Russo-Japanese War, intervening in commercial transports by converting these into warships when they reached the Red Sea was perceived as a direct threat by the British.

The Russian vessels that were positioned and patrolled from the bases they formed in the Red Sea; their intervention of trade ships belonging to the British and their disruption of logistic support provided indirectly by the British and bound for Japan was more than sufficient for a change in their political approach. As a result, following these interventions the British Government not only reacted to Russian on a diplomatic level, but also mobilized its fleet to end the operations being carried out by Russian vessels. Russia that was already struggling in the war with Japan, could not take the risk of any conflict with Britain that had the most powerful fleet of that period. In view of this, the Russians were forced to withdraw these vessels. Nevertheless, Abdulhamid II failed to achieve results from the policies of balance or objectivity he adopted particularly regarding the Turkish Straits. But the British that gave no support to the Ottoman State, repeated their warnings on complying with the regime of passage through the Turkish Straits in an even more determined manner.

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