

## RUSSIA'S BOSPORUS EXPEDITION – PLANS AND POSSIBLE ACTIONS OF THE FIRST HALF OF 1915

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### Abstract

The article runs the problem of the Bosphorus expedition plans in Russia. First proposed in the second half of the XVII century, it was rejected and taken again into the consideration during the reigns of Catherine II, Alexander I, Nicholas I, Alexander III and finally Nicholas II. The last emperor made his choice for the Far East in 1895-1896 to come back to the necessity of the Naval attack on the Bosphorus preparation once again after the moment Turkey entered World War I. The Turkish attack on Russian was long awaited but come suddenly and that led to the crisis in Transcaucasia. Total impossibility to predict the end of the Sarikamish battle happened to be the reason why Grand Duke Nicolas Nikolaevich – Russian commander-in-chief at that moment – appealed for the Allied Naval demonstration nearby the shores of the Ottoman Empire. The decisive strike in the Passes region inevitably created the problem of the Russian participation – the knocking in the Turkish backdoor simultaneously with the Allied amphibious attack. Good and logical on a paper – this plan was not ever to be fulfilled, and in 1915 because of the unpreparedness of the Army, navy and transportation flotilla.

**Keywords:** *Bosphorus, Dardanelles, Imperial Russian Navy, landing operation*

The plan of the possible naval attack on the Straits firstly was proposed in the reign of Catherine II in 1783 by admiral Samuel Greig – a Scott in the Russian service.<sup>1</sup> Not being accepted by the Empress, it was occasionally revised during the Russo-Turkish wars in 1807<sup>2</sup> and 1853.<sup>3</sup> Obviously forgotten after the Paris peace Treaty in 1856, the plan was remembered and accepted again after the Bulgarian crisis in 1885.<sup>4</sup> The Achilles' heel of the project had always been the lack of the free available marine tonnage for the transportation of troops and supply.

By the midst of 90-ths the latter problem was to a certain extent settled and the readiness for the landing operation was raised by the annual joint Army and Navy maneuvers in the Black Sea. But the new emperor decided to use the potential, created in the reign of his predecessor, in the Far East.<sup>5</sup> The chance for the independent action on the Bosphorus

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<sup>1</sup> "Ovladenie Dardanellami v 1783 g. Predstavlenie Admirala Samuila Grejga", *Russkaya Starina*. 1878. Vol 22. №. 7. pp. 449-452.

<sup>2</sup> Savvaitov P.I. *Vztyatie Anapy ehskadroj Chernomorskogo Flota, Pod Komandoyu Kontr-admirala S.A. Pustoshkina v 1807 godu*, Spb.1851. p. 4.; Shcherbachev O., *Afonskoe Srazhenie, Morskoy Sbornik*. 1915. №12. pp.12-13.

<sup>3</sup> *Bogdanovich M.I., Vostochnaya Vojna 1853-1856 gg. v Svyazi s Sovremennoj Ej Politicheskoy Obstanovkoy*, Spb.1876. Vol.1. pp. 67-70.; "Vojny Rossii s Turciej 1828-1829 i 1853-1854", *Russkaya Starina*. 1876. Vol 16. №.8. pp.675-676.; Tarle E.V., *Krymskaya Vojna*, M. 2003. Vol.1. p.143.; For details, see: Airapetov O.R., "K Voprosu o Proekte Zahvata Bosfora (Iz Istorii Vneshnej Politiki i Strategii Rossii 1806-1884 gg.)", *Etudes Balkanique*. Sofiya. 2009. Vol.1. pp.143-158.

<sup>4</sup> Airapetov O.R. *Zabytaya Kar'era «Russkogo Mol'tke»*. N.N. Obruchev (1830-1904), Spb.1998. pp. 251-257.

<sup>5</sup> Airapetov O.R., *Na Puti k Krahu. Russko-Yaponskaya Vojna 1904-1905 gg. Voенно-Politicheskaya Istorija*,

was lost, the might and possibilities necessary for an amphibious attack of such scale were never re-gained before 1914.<sup>6</sup> Such plans were never revised by the Army or Navy General Staffs before the Great War, even in 1912, when the Slavic allies asked for the Russian assistance at the Passes. No matter how high the temptation seemed to be, the proposals were refused.

18(31) December 1914 was the turning point. That day Enver-pasha seemed to be very close to success in the Sarikamish battle and the Russian army repulsed three assaults on the town and started the outflanking movement.<sup>7</sup> No one could yet be sure in the result, the Supreme Head Quarter had no information from the Caucasus. Baranovichi didn't have a direct connection with Sarikamish but only with Tiflis and Kars. Caucasian Army chief of staff and de facto its commander infantry general A.Z. Mishlaevskii sent to Baranovichi official dispatches like: "In the Sarikamish region the battle continues."<sup>8</sup>

The very day of December 18(31) Supreme Commander-in-Chief Grand Duke Nicholas in a conversation with the British representative major-general Hanbury-Williams proposed a joint Allied Naval demonstration against Turkey which would help the Russian Caucasian front. The problem was that the Caucasian army at that moment couldn't be reinforced because all the Russian reserves were sent against Austria-Hungary and Germany.<sup>9</sup> The SHQ was afraid of the grave consequences in case of defeat. The attack on the certain sensitive point of the Ottoman Empire could have an effect desired, which could neutralize possible Turkish success.<sup>10</sup> But by saying so Grand Duke specially stressed that he didn't ask anything but only raised a proposal.<sup>11</sup>

Among the possible aims of the Allied attack the Passes were regarded as the most obvious objective point. The Russian Navy specialists from very beginning had great doubts in the Allies readiness to go on such a high risky operation in order to help Russia but nevertheless they were ready to cooperate.<sup>12</sup> Russia didn't have any choice – Grand Duke Nicholas was very clear to say – "In no way we can seize the Passes by ourselves."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Airapetov O.R., *Na Vostochnom Napravlenii. Sud'ba Bosforskoj Ehkspedicii v Pravlenie Imperatora Nikolaya II, Poslednyaya Vojna Imperatorskoj Rossii*. M. 2002. pp.158-261.

<sup>7</sup> Ahatkin Kr.[Z.], *Sarykamysh, Voennyj Sbornik Obshchestva Revnitelej Voennyh Znanij*. Belgrad. 1925. Vol 6. pp.124-125.

<sup>8</sup> *Russkij Invalid*. 16 dec. 1914 g. № 292. p.1.

<sup>9</sup> Hanbury-Williams J. *The Emperor Nicholas II. As I knew him*, Lnd. 1922. p.24.

<sup>10</sup> *Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya v Ehposu Imperializma. Dokumenty iz Arhivov Carskogo i Vremennogo Pravitel'stv 1878-1917 gg.*(MOEHI), Ser. III. 1914-1917 gg. M.-L.1935. Vol.6. CH.2.(05.08.1914 – 13.06.1915) p.307.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p.308.

<sup>12</sup> Rossijskij Gosudarstvennyj Arhiv Voenno-Morskogo Flota(RGA VMF), F.716. Op.1. D.29. ll.21; 27 ob.

<sup>13</sup> *МОЭИ*. Ser.III. 1914-1917. M.-L.1935. Vol.6. Part.2.(05.08.1914-13.01.1915 g.) p.308.

Grand Duke proposals were sent to Kitchener, who re-addressed them to the admiralty. January 20 1915 it informed the Russian Foreign Minister Sazonov that the Allied fleet would try to force a crossing over the the Dardanelles. The operation first planned to long 3-4 weeks.<sup>14</sup> By January 20 Sarikamish crisis was already over – Turkish army was completely beaten. The troops led by major-general V.P. Lyakhov started to clean the Batum region from the Turkish troops, on January 31 1915 major-general F.G. Chernozubov came back to Tebriz.

In January 25 already Grand Duke answered the Kitchener's telegram personally He explained, that an appeal for help came under the condition of crisis in the Caucasus but in no way he would weaken the press upon the Germans and Austrians and thus in no way Russia participated and never wanted to participate in the choice of the main strike of the possible blow just because the Russian forces were not able to take part in it.<sup>15</sup>

Nicholas Nikolaevich pointed out the following explanations:

- 1) The Black sea navy weakness – only the whole squadron of the our ships of the line was equal to the Turkish Navy.
- 2) The Russian ships were taking the coal reserve for 4 days only, whilst it was impossible to reload them in an open sea, especially in the winter time.
- 3) The Russian Navy base was situated in 24 hours of steaming on economical speed from the Bosphorus.
- 4) Coast artillery positions was strong.
- 5) The units which were needed from the landing – that was no less than 2 Army Corps – could be gathered only from the european fronts.

The latter decision was obviously unacceptable for the Grand Duke, who was devoted that was victory in war could be attained only in the shortest strategical direction – against Germany. He specially stressed: "We cannot expect to defeat Turkey on the Caucasian front. Even the capture of Erzurum will not be decisive."<sup>16</sup> Russian intelligence got the information that the Turks were moving their troops from Edirne (Adrianopolis II AC) and İzmir (Smirna V AC) and 12 infantry division from Shatt al-Arab to the Caucasus. Thus in a few months the Caucasian army which couldn't be reinforced after the heavy losses, would again face the superior enemy forces.<sup>17</sup> Something still had to be done.

The war with Turkey had also an economic impact on Russia. The closure of the Passes at September 27 1914 was another severe blow upon the Russian economy after the commercial navigation on the Baltic sea was stopped in August 1914. For example - even in August and September of 1914 Odessa – one of the principal Russian trade ports – was visited only by 5 steamers (each

<sup>14</sup> *МОЭИ*. Ser.III. 1914-1917. М.-Л.1935. Vol.7. Part.1.(14.01.1915-23.05.1915 г.) p.64.

<sup>15</sup> *МОЭИ*. Ser.III. 1914-1917. М.-Л.1935. Vol.7. Part.1.(14.01.1915-23.05.1915 г.) p.104.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*. p.105.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*. p.102.

month), export in 1914 was reduced by 5 and import by 3 times in comparison with 1913.<sup>18</sup> By the beginning of 1915 Russia lost 97% of her foreign trade. Neither Vladivostok, nor Archangel'sk could be efficient substitute, because of the transport and logistics problems.<sup>19</sup> As to the only non frozen harbour on the Kola peninsula, it didn't exist as a port in 1914. Romanov upon Murman (nowadays Murmansk) was built later –and the railroad, connecting it with Petrograd, was more or less ready only by January 1917.<sup>20</sup> But that was only Russia which was interested in the solution of the Turkish problem.

The first London reaction on the Turkish entry to World War I was the long-time expected declaration of the end of Egypt and Creta occupation. November 5 1914 the island was annexed to the British empire<sup>21</sup>, December 18 a protectorate over Egypt was declared.<sup>22</sup> In November Britain started the action in the Persian Gulf. An infantry brigade was sent from India to Bachrein immediately after "Goeben" and "Breslau" anchored in the bay of Golden Horn. After the declaration of war the number of the british troops here were duplicated to division level and it started to act in the estuary of Shatt al Arab. November 29 Basra was taken, December 9 – Kurna, which laid 50 miles up the river.<sup>23</sup> Thus by December 1914 the small expeditionary Anglo-Indian detachment controlled the mouths of the Tiger and Euphrates which were to become the main operational routes in their actions on Baghdad direction.<sup>24</sup>

January 27 – February 11 1915 the Turks organised an attack against the Suez channel. This attempt of Jemal-pasha was beaten back by the comparatively low British forces<sup>25</sup>, the losses were quite painful for the army of 15 000 – 1 000 killed, 2000 wounded and 600 prisoners.<sup>26</sup> But this very (?) failed attack made London hurry with the expedition against Dardanelles. Plans of a pure naval demonstration were forgotten.<sup>27</sup>

Vice-admiral Sackville Carden who was in charge of the operation planned to start it in the second half of February. London asked for the French assistance.<sup>28</sup> The main problem which arose from the very beginning was the deficiency of the

<sup>18</sup> *Odesskoe Gradonachal'stvo (Po Poslednim Otchetnym Dannym za 1914 god), Pravitel'stvenny Vestnik. 28.02.(12.03) 1916. № 47. p.4.*

<sup>19</sup> Grigorovich I.K., *Vospominaniya Byvshego Morskogo Ministra*, Spb.1999. p.155.

<sup>20</sup> For details: Airapetov O.R., "Vstuplenie Turcii v Vojnu: Ehkonomicheskie Posledstviya Dlya Rossii", *Problemy Nacional'noj Strategii. Rossijskij Institut Strategicheskikh Issledovanij*. M.2013. №3. pp.174-189.

<sup>21</sup> *Ukaz o Prisoedinenii Kipra k Velikobritanskim Vladeniyam, 05.11.1914., Izvestiya Ministerstva Inostrannyh del (IMID)*. Pgr.1915. №2. pp.39-40.

<sup>22</sup> *Ob'yavlenie Anglijskogo Protektorata nad Egiptom, IMID*. Pgr.1915. №1. pp.73-74.

<sup>23</sup> *The Times History and Encyclopedia of the War*, Part 123. Vol.10, Dec.26, 1916. pp.201-202.

<sup>24</sup> Ludshujejt E.F., *Turciya v Gody Pervoj Mirovoj vojny 1914-1918 gg. Voенно-politicheskij Oчерk*, M.1966. pp. 89-90..

<sup>25</sup> Aaronson A. *With the Turks in Palestine*. Boston and New York, 1918. p.44.; Ericson E. *Ordered to die. A history of the Ottoman Army in the First World war*, Greenwood Press. Westport. 2001. pp.69-70.

<sup>26</sup> Djemal Pasha *Memoires of a Turkish Statesman - 1913-1919*, Lnd. [1932] p.159.

<sup>27</sup> Grey of Fallodon Ed. *Twenty-five years 1892-1916*, NY. 1925. Vol.2. p.78.

<sup>28</sup> *МОЗИ*, Ser.III. 1914-1917. M.-L.1935. Vol.7. Part.1.(14.01.1915-23.05.1915) p.64.

available land forces. The experience of vice-admiral John Duckworth attempt in 1807 as well as the actions against Aleksandria in 1882 and Ta-hu forts in 1900 clearly indicated the necessity of the combined amphibious operation even against the enemy, technically or organisationally inferior to the attacker. It was taken for granted that the occupation of Gallipoli peninsula was the key for the successful fleet actions in the Marmora Sea.

Carden proposed open an attack by the slow demolition one fort in the Passes after another and forcing one mine position after another.<sup>29</sup> Army in that case should guarantee the fleet trophy. But in the end of 1914 – beginning of 1915 the Britons had no trained reserves, whilst the French were not ready to send significant amount of forces out of France having the German army standing in a few marches from Paris. In the very beginning of 1915 the Allies had to ask Grand Duke Nicolas to reinforce them. He agreed to send 14-battalion regiment, 1 battery and a Cosack half-hundred on the condition that the Allies will guarantee the transportation of that unit. As a result they decided to reject the idea of the Russian participation in the first stage of operation.<sup>30</sup>

3 Army Corps – 120 000 men – ANZAC, British marine and territorial divisions, Anglo-Indian and French colonial divisions – all the units had to be gathered, what explained the time lag between the first Naval attack on the Passes and the landing operation itself – February 19 and April 25 1915.<sup>31</sup> But, no matter how important for the Allies was demolition of the traffic jam on the Passes, Russia in the first half of 1915 was obviously unable to participate in the attack on Constantinopolis.

1. Russian Black Sea navy was not yet strong enough to guarantee the safe navigation. Black sea dreadnoughts were expected to put in operation: “Empress Maria” – in the spring of 1915, “Empress Catherine II” in the end of the year, and “Emperor Alexander III” – in the summer of 1916.<sup>32</sup>
2. Possibilities of the Russian transport fleet were also insufficient. Rear-admiral A.A. Khomenko, put in charge of Transport flotilla, based in Odessa, came to the city on February 13 1915. Following his official report, flotilla could use 140 steamers, which were able to carry 300 infantry companies, 12 cavalry squadrons and 24 batteries (field artillery) without transport wagons.<sup>33</sup> That was obviously not enough for the actions on the unfriendly coast. Khomenko couldn't use all the transports, because

<sup>29</sup> Lambert A.[D.] *Admirals. The Naval Commanders who made Britain Great*. Lnd. 2008. p.325.

<sup>30</sup> Puankare R., *Na Sluzhbe Francii. Vospominaniya za Devyat' let*, M.1936. Vol.1. p.331.; Danilov YU.N., *Russkie Otryady na Francuzskom i Makedonskom Frontah 1916-1918 gg.* (Po materialam Francuzskogo Voennogo ministerstva), Parizh. 1933. pp.13-14.

<sup>31</sup> Bubnov A.[D.], *V Carskoj Stavke. Vospominaniya Admirala Bubnova*, N'yu-Jork. 1955, p.136.; Korbett YU. *Operacii Anglijskogo Flota v Mirovuyu Vojnu*, L.1928. Vol.2, p.130.; *The Times History of the War*, Part 62. Vol. 5. Oct. 26, 1915. pp.362-375.

<sup>32</sup> Shacillo K.F., *Russkij Imperializm i Razvitie Flota Nakanune Pervoj Mirovoj Vojny 1906-1914 gg*, M.1968. p.160.; Petrov M.[A.], *Podgotovka Rossii k Mirovoj Vojne na More*, M.-L.1926. p.150.; Grigorovich I.K., *Uk.soch.*, p.117.

<sup>33</sup> *PIA BM F.716. Op.2. D.237. L.1.*

part of them was used on supplying lines in the Black sea, including the needs of Caucasian front. Besides, transport flotilla had no special ships for amphibious war. They had to be ordered and build.

3. Lack of army reserves, which could be used in the landing operation. March 3 1915 SHQ issued an order to transport to Odessa V Caucasian Army Co under the command of gen.-lt. N.M. Istomin(1-2 Kuban' plastun (infantry) brigades and the 3 Caucasian rifle division – 36 thousand men, 60 guns in total) and the "Special purpose"regiment (53 Don cossack).<sup>34</sup>

On May 1-3 the Russian South-Western Sitaution was broken by the Austro-German offensive be Gorlitze-Tarnow – as a result on May 10 1915 r V Caucasian was transferred to the river San. In Odessa there stayed only 2 batallions of the Guardian Navy Crew, which were in June transferred to Sebastople and 6 militia druzhini(batallions), which were hardly ebough for the guard duties in the garrison.

As a result in July 1915 Black sea Navy stuff received an order from SHQ – be ready for the landing operation by the spring of 1916.

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<sup>34</sup> Aprelev B.[P.], *Vyderzhki iz Dnevnika ot 14/27 fevr. po 12/25 iyulya 1915 g*, Zarubezhnyj Morskoj Sbornik. Pl'zen'. 1930. №№11-12. pp.9-10.; Rytchenkov S., *Chasti Osobogo Naznacheniya v Vojnu 1914-1916 gg*, Chasovoj. Parizh. 1961. №426. pp.14- 15.; Rytchenkov S. *Rasskaz o Neudavshemsya Desante*, Chasovoj. Parizh. 1964. №451. p.19.

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