

**LORD CURZON AND THE USE OF SECRET
INTELLIGENCE AT THE LAUSANNE
CONFERENCE: 1922-1923**

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George Curzon, the British Foreign Secretary, found himself in an unenviable position at the Lausanne Conference which opened on 20 November 1922. The great victory of 1918 which, as Harold Nicolson boasted, had left 'the Ottoman Empire at our feet dismembered and impotent, its capital and Caliph at the mercy of our guns', and which had allowed the Allies to dictate the Treaty of Sèvres, had been dissipated by neglect of the Near East and the Turkish revival under Mustafa Kemâl. Any hopes the British might have had of substituting the victories in the Summer of 1922, whilst the Çanakkale (Chanak) crisis brought Britain to the brink of a new war in September. Although this had been averted by a mixture of good luck, and better sense at Chanak than in London, Curzon had few advantages when he travelled to Switzerland to renegotiate the peace settlement with the victorious Turks. He had few troops and, with the exceptions of New Zealand and Newfoundland, the British Dominions made it plain that they would not provide any military support for a new adventure in the Near East. Relations with his French and Italian allies were at a low ebb and the new Prime Minister, Andrew Bonar Law, was anxious to avoid new commitments, particularly in the Near East, both because he had already declared that Britain could not act as the policeman of the world and because he knew that difficulties with the French over reparations in Europe could not be long postponed. Even though the Anglo-French difficulties were not so apparent to the Turks, Curzon was acutely aware of the potential for a breakdown of cooperation either arising from difference over Turkey in the Near East or

over Germany in Europe and he nursed painful memories of his recent tearful encounter with the formidable French premier, Raymond Poincaré.¹

Curzon did, however, have two important assets—the strength of his own personality, backed by his knowledge of the region, and the British ability to intercept and read much of the Turkish military and diplomatic signals traffic, the fruits of the modern British intelligence establishment which had been created during and immediately after the First World War.² British cryptanalysts from both the armed forces and the newly established Government Code and Cypher School (GCCS), working on telegrams sent by cable or on intercepted wireless traffic, proved adept in the 1920s at breaking many of the codes of friend and foe alike. Between mid-June 1920 and mid-January 1924 the School issued 12,600 intercepted signals, an average of 290 a month. This intercepted material could normally be made available to British decision-makers within a week and often sooner.³ In particular the British wireless listening-post in Istanbul proved an invaluable source of Turkish intercept and the codes employed were easy to read although the information obtained was not comprehensive.⁴ Nonetheless, Sir Horace Rumbold, Curzon's deputy during the first round of the conference and his replacement during the second, acknowledged the value of this intelligence when he observed that 'the information we obtained at the psychological moments from secret sources was invaluable to us, and put us

¹ See Michael Dockrill and J. Douglas Goold, *Peace Without Promise: Britain and the Peace Conferences, 1919-1923* (1981) pp. 81-252 for a full account of the negotiations with Turkey after the war. H. Nicolson, *Curzon: The Last Phase, 1919-1925: A Study in Post-War Diplomacy* (1934) p. 3. For the Poincaré incident see J. Douglas Goold "Lord Hardinge as Ambassador to France and the Anglo-French dilemma over Germany and the Near East, 1920-1922", *Historical Journal*, Vol. 21 (178) pp. 982-933.

² See Keith Jeffery and Alan Sharp, "Lord Curzon and Secret Intelligence" in Christopher Andrew and Jeremy Noakes, eds., *Intelligence and International Relations: 1900-1945*, Exeter, 1987, pp. 103-8 for a brief account of this process. See also F. H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War* (1979) chapter 1 and C. Andrew, *Secret Service: The Making of the British Intelligence Community* (1985) chapter 9.

³ See the valuable article by John Ferris, "Whitehall's Black Chamber: British Cryptology and the Government Code and Cypher School, 1919-1929", *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 2/1 (January 1987) pp. 54-91. Also Jeffery and Sharp *op. cit.*, p. 108.

⁴ Ferris, *op. cit.*, p. 72 and pp. 75-77.

in the position of a man who is playing Bridge and knows the cards in his adversary's hand.⁵

The Lausanne Conference thus offers an interesting case study of the advantages and the drawbacks of the use of secret intelligence in an actual negotiation. It was held in two sessions, from 20 November 1922 to 4 February 1923 and then from 23 April until 24 July 1923. Its conclusion marked the final phase of the peacemaking process after the First World War, a process which had taken longer than the war itself. Seeing all the cards in an opponent's hand does not guarantee that one can take all the tricks particularly when the hand is revealed as a strong one, but Curzon and Rumbold did know when there might be flexibility in the Turkish position and when it would be unwise to press İsmet Pasha, the chief Turkish negotiator, too hard. On several occasions, Rumbold persuaded Curzon to modify his position and to accommodate the Turks because he was convinced by the intercepts that the Turkish freedom of manoeuvre was extremely limited.⁶ In May 1923 he wrote to Curzon suggesting that the draft convention on legal arrangements for foreigners in Turkey was not going to succeed: 'I feel that İsmet's hands are tied in this matter by instructions from Angora and you will have seen from the secret sources that if we insist on going beyond the Montagna formula, he is instructed to break off negotiations and leave the Conference. In fact this is the one question on which the Conference may break down...We will do our best to get some safeguards for our nationals, but I do not know whether our public opinion would understand a rupture over this business.' Curzon was persuaded to alter his position.⁷

There were also moments when the British delegates in Lausanne were encouraged to stand firm despite a lack of support at home and what appeared to be a dangerous situation in the negotiations. On 1 January 1923 Curzon wrote to his wife following a visit to Bonar Law: 'I found Bonar longing to clear out of Mosul, the Straits and Constantinople, willing to give up anything and everything rather than have a row...He has not the clear grasp of Foreign Affairs. No instinct for Oriental diplomacy...I was really much staggered at his flabbiness and want of grip.'⁸ Yet he was also aware from the

⁵Rumbold to Oliphant 18. 7. 23 Rumbold MSS De. 30 in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

⁶For example over the claims of the Turkish Petroleum Company, Rumbold to Curzon 19. 7. 23 and FO telegrams, 16 and 20. 7. 23, **Documents on British Foreign Policy: 1919-1939**, First Series (henceforth **DBFP**) XVIII no. 680 and nn. 3 and 7.

⁷Rumbold to Curzon 12. 5. 23. Rumbold MSS Dep. 31.

⁸Curzon to Grace Curzon, 1. 1. 23 Curzon Papers MSS Eur F112/797 in the India Office Library. Bonar Law had indeed written to Curzon, 7. 12. 22, 'As

intercepts that İsmet perceived himself to be squeezed between the terms acceptable to the British and their allies and those acceptable to Ankara. This material gleaned from the Black Jumbos, Black Elephants Ben Jamins, or BJs, as they were variously described, proved a useful boots to British morale in difficult circumstances and helped them to interpret what was happening. Nevile Henderson, the chargé in İstanbul, was 'convinced' that İsmet's opening speech to the conference had been 'largely concocted at Angora before he left. Ever since he made it the BJs have been full of telegrams complaining that Angora has not received the full text of that speech... I should not be surprised if İsmet watered down what he had been told to say.'⁹ The same sources tended to confirm that İsmet's personal preference was for a more conciliatory policy than that favoured by Ankara. In February 1923 an intelligence report on the 'prospects of peace' gave a brief account of the 'difficult internal situation' in Turkey which had led to the temporary rupture in the negotiations. 'S.I.S.¹⁰ information' about İsmet's attitude, it pointed out, 'has indicated that he has been personally in favour of a moderate policy.'¹¹ In June Rumbold told Curzon, 'You will have noticed from the usual secret sources that İsmet's position with his own government is becoming more and more difficult.'¹²

It was also helpful to know that the Turkish perception of the relationship between the European allies was rather different from Curzon's. 'The relations between the French and British are reported good', noted İsmet, 'There is little chance of these men foregoing their old confidence in one another.'¹³ Curzon was less sanguine, particularly in December 1922 and January 1923. Britain's diplomatic position was not strong. Intercepts indicated that France was privately offering concessions to the Turks whilst the Soviets were encouraging the Turks to take a hard line and hoping to reach a settlement with the French, who regarded the Near East as less important than their concerns with Germany. 'It is clear to me', declared Rumbold on 16 January 1923, 'that the deeper the French get into the mire of the Ruhr the more keen they are to get out of the Turkish mire.'¹⁴ Added to these difficulties there seemed to be a serious risk of a collapse of the

regards the position in Mesopotamia of course what I would like is some method of getting out of it altogether.' *Ibid.*, F112/282.

⁹Henderson to Rumbold 5. 12. 22, Rumbold MSS Dep. 30.

¹⁰The Secret Intelligence Service, commonly known as M.I.6, was responsible for gathering foreign intelligence.

¹¹Secret Political Report 21. 2. 23, S.I.S. Misc/26, E2083 in FO371/9121, Public Record Office, Kew.

¹²Rumbold to Curzon 2. 6. 23, Rumbold MSS Dep. 30.

¹³Intercept, İsmet to Angora 23. 12. 22, E14392 in FO371/7967.

¹⁴*Ibid.* Rumbold to Henderson 16. 1. 23 Rumbold MSS Dep. 30.

negotiations in Lausanne. On 25 December Henderson reported, from 'the usual secret sources', that İsmet believed the Allies were making impossible demands and were seeking to reach a conclusion.¹⁵ Curzon said this was 'palpably untrue' and countered that the Turks were 'becoming increasingly hostile and even insolent'.¹⁶ Rumbold was also worried. 'I am not very optimistic', he wrote on 26 December, 'and I think the odds are now rather against the success of the conference. But you know what the Turks are like. Over and over again at Constantinople we have thought that the breaking point has been reached and yet somehow or other we have got through our difficulties.'¹⁷ By 28 December Curzon believed 'All this information points to rupture.'¹⁸

Yet the crisis was averted and Curzon's position, despite what he perceived a Bonar Law's lack of support, began to improve.¹⁹ It became clear that the Turks, whilst not prepared to abandon their own vital interests, were anxious to make peace and that they saw their relationship with Great Britain as the central issue at stake. 'If they really want peace, as is clear from all the secret telegrams,' Leo Emary told Curzon on 2 February 1923, 'it is peace with us they want.'²⁰ In addition, the Turks were under pressure themselves. Rumbold told Henderson on 30 January, 'We know that the Turks are very worried and consider that they have sustained a failure. In any event their personal position is none too rosy for if they return with what the Grand National Assembly will consider a bad treaty they would get dropped on, whereas if they return without having signed anything at all they will be accused of having wasted nearly three months and much money. So they are going to get it in the neck anyway. I cannot say that I am sorry for them as I have never run up against such a lot of pig-headed, stupid and irritating people in my life.'²¹

The intercepts should have helped the British to understand the psychological perspectives and aspirations of the new government in Ankara though there is little evidence to suggest that this occurred. Kemâl himself

¹⁵Henderson to Curzon 25. 12. 22, DBFP XVIII no. 323.

¹⁶Curzon to Crowe 26. 12. 22, E14392 in FO371/7967, also DBFP XVIII no. 291.

¹⁷Rumbold to Henderson 26. 12. 22, Rumbold MSS Dep. 30.

¹⁸Curzon minute, 28. 12. 22, E14392 in FO371/7967.

¹⁹Boner Law wrote to Curzon, 8. 1. 23, that there were two vital points. 'The first is that we should not go to war for the sake of Mosul, and second, that if the French, as we know to be the case, will not join us, we shall not by ourselves fight the Turks to enforce what is left of the Treaty of Sèvres.' Curzon Papers MSS Eur F112/282.

²⁰Amery to Curzon, 2. 2. 23, *Ibid.*

²¹Rumbold to Henderson 30. 1. 23, Rumbold MSS Dep. 30.

noted that 'the Entente Powers do not realize that the Ottoman Empire has passed into history and is superseded by a new nation and state, determined to obtain their complete independence and sovereignty.'²² İsmet's intercepted report of 23 December 1922 offers a particular insight into the way in which he and his colleagues wished the European powers to revise the way in which they saw, and treated Kemâl's government. The Allies, he observed, 'are extremely tiresome and annoying and by their method of discussion they wish to cow down the Turk and on the other hand drag him gradually into a quagmire by throwing him into discussions over rotten and insolent demands. In almost every question we have our backs to the wall. Either they will bring us to our knees and conclude another form of Sèvres Treaty or we will bring them to theirs. We are determined to conclude a peace like every other civilized and independent nation.' The Foreign Office reaction was sceptical and dismissive, the Turks were suffering from 'delusion and fanaticism' against which nothing would avail but 'force or fear'.²³ This perhaps represented a lost opportunity, but the British negotiators preferred to rely on what they saw as trusted and successful methods of Eastern diplomacy. As Leo Amery reminded Curzon, 'There is always a moment in buying a carpet from a Turk when you have to leave the shop. If that moment is rightly judged, you will find that before you have got 50 yards the Turk has caught you up and agreed to your price, accompanied by a porter carrying the carpet!'²⁴

There can thus be little doubt that the information which the British were able to extract from their secret sources was of great value to them, but number of problems did arise. Although the signals interception operation in İstanbul was extremely efficient, Curzon could not always rely on receiving the information in good time. This was because although some paraphrases of secret intelligence were sent directly from İstanbul to Lausanne, the intercepts themselves had to go to London, first to the War Office,²⁵ thence to the Foreign Office and only then were they sent to İstanbul. On 26 December, for example, Curzon complained that although he was aware of two intercepts of obvious importance, he had not yet seen them. Indeed he only saw them on 28 December, three days after the War Office had received them.²⁶ General 'Tim' Harington in İstanbul apologised, 'I am afraid these secret intercepts take a long time to reach you owing to the fact that I am not

²²S.R. Sonyel, *Turkish Diplomacy: 1916-1923, Mustafa Kemal and the Turkish National Movement*, Beverley Hills, 1975, p 209.

²³Intercept, İsmet to Angora 23. 12. 22, E14392 in FO371/7967. Lindsay minute, 27. 12. 22, *Ibid.*

²⁴Amery to Curzon 15. 12. 22, Curzon Papers MSS Eur F112/282.

²⁵The material itself was collected by army personnel.

²⁶Cover for 'Conference File 79'. E14392 in FO371/7967.

allowed to send them direct.²⁷ Colonel Baird, the military attaché in İstanbul confessed to Rumbold, 'I am sorry that we are not allowed to send Ben Jamin's notes direct to Lausanne. Several item of interest to us, but only of real importance and value to Lord Curzon and yourself, and then only if communicated to you at once, have appeared and I have urged their immediate repetition to yo, but apparently the War Office instructions on this point are categoric and our hands are tied. I found on investigation that the two messages from Harington to Troopers [the War Office] to which Lord Curzon in a telegram to the Foreign Office referred some weeks ago, saying how valuable they would have been to him, were both messages the direct repetition of which was forbidden under the above instructions.'²⁸ Things improved during the second phase of the negotiations and Rumbold did receive important material directly from İstanbul. He wrote in appreciation to Henderson at the end of the conference: 'Your secret telegrams have been most useful and all arrived here at the psychological moment, thereby being of immense assistance to us. It is a case admirable liaison work between the Constantinople Embassy and this delegation and does you the greatest credit.'²⁹

Once received the information still had to be evaluated and assessed. Here judgement and interpretation were vital. Faced with the same intercepts and other intelligence at the crisis of the first session, Curzon and Rumbold reacted quite differently from Harington and Henderson, who advocated an evacuation of İstanbul and İzmit and the withdrawal of British forces to the Gelibolu Peninsula. In London the Cabinet was set to agree³⁰ but Curzon objected strongly, 'We have reason to believe that İsmet is much perturbed as to situation into which mistaken tactics of his Delegation have forced him, and it may very well be that before I leave on Friday night (2 February) the situation change.' Rumbold told Henderson that he, Curzon and Sir Eyre Crowe (the Permanent Under Secretary at the Foreign Office) had considered the matter with great care and had been 'unanimous in deciding that there could be no question of evacuating Constantinople in present circumstances', adding 'our impression from your...telegrams was that Harington and [Admiral] Brock [C in C Mediterranean] had got cold feet.'³¹ They had reached this conclusion even before receiving Henderson's telegram of 30 January with information 'from a sometimes well informed source', that 'after final secret session held yesterday morning Grand National Assembly decided that

²⁷Harington to Curzon, 13. 1. 23, Curzon Papers MSS Eur F112/283.

²⁸Baird to Rumbold, 23. 1. 23, Rumbold MSS Dep. 30.

²⁹Rumbold to Henderson, 17. 7. 23, *Ibid.*, Dep. 31.

³⁰Harington tel 28. 1. 23, *DBFP XVIII* no. 348 and n.1. Cabinet Minutes, 30. 1. 23, CAB23/45/4 (23), Public Record Office.

³¹Curzon to Lindsay, 30. 1. 23, *DBFP XVIII* no. 353. Rumbold to Henderson, 30. 1. 23, Rumbold MSS Dep. 30.

war must at all costs be avoided.' İsmet 'had been instructed to ask for adjournment rather than rupture of conference and to give undertaking if necessary to refrain from military action of any sort during adjournment.'³² In this case, therefore, the secret intelligence served to confirm a judgement taken on broader grounds and based on political and diplomatic experience.

There was also the problem of how far information discovered from secret sources could be used in negotiations without revealing that these sources existed and thus endangering them in the future. This aspect certainly exercised Curzon, who was incensed by various revelations of what he regarded as French double dealing from intercepted French telegrams and frustrated because he knew he could not confront the culprits with the evidence.³³ Eventually, in 1923, he lost his sense of proportion and taunted the Soviets with extracts of their intercepted and decoded telegrams thus forcing a change of cyphers which it took GCCS some time to break.³⁴ At Lausanne Rumbold had to be careful not to reveal his knowledge either to the Turks or his colleagues. 'The only matter which worries me at the moment,' he told Curzon on 2 June 1923, 'is the knowledge of İsmet's own position vis-a-vis his Government. I cannot, of course, let my colleagues into my confidence...'³⁵

Secret intelligence was thus a valuable, if double-edged, weapon. It even confirmed that the settlement negotiated at Lausanne was the best possible in the circumstances. 'On the whole the treaty has by no means a bad press and the skill and patience of our delegation is fully recognised. There is no reason to suppose that we could have got better terms, judging by İsmet's telegrams from Angora.'³⁶ Its exploitation required sound judgement based on experience and an ability to maximise the available resources, but the information which the British obtained in this way may have helped to bring about a more realistic frame of mind in the policy making elite. As Dockrill and Goold perceptively comment, 'To Lloyd George Kemâl was simply a bandit, and to Curzon İsmet was a carpet-monger; there was no thought given to the possibility that they might have limited or legitimate goals.'³⁷ In such circumstances it can only have helped

³²Henderson to Lindsay, 30. 1. 23, DBFP XVIII no. 354.

³³Jeffery and Sharp *op. cit.*, pp. 121-2.

³⁴Christopher Andrew, 'Secret Intelligence and British Foreign Policy 1900-1939' in Andrew and Noakes *op. cit.*, pp. 17-8.

³⁵Rumbold to Curzon, 2. 6. 23, Rumbold MSS Dep. 31.

³⁶Osborne minute, 25. 7. 23., DBFP XVIII no. 683 n. 5.

³⁷Dockrill and Goold *op. cit.*, p. 251. We are grateful to the librarians and archivists at the Public Record Office, the India Office, the Bodleian Library and the University of Ulster for their assistance. The Faculty of Humanities

for the British to be made aware of precisely what the Turks felt to be non-negotiable and what would be probable sources of crisis if matters were pressed to a breach. If Lausanne became the longest-lasting and most successful of the post-First World War settlements it was because the demands of the main participants were realistic, limited and attainable and secret intelligence played its part in making at least one of the parties to the negotiations aware of the vital interests of its opponents.

of the University of Ulster provided funds for the research of this paper, the original version of which was delivered to the Medlicott Symposium on Intelligence and International Relations at Exeter University in 1985. With the generous assistance of the İnönü Foundation and the Turkish Government, Dr. Sharp gave this amended paper at the conference held in İstanbul in October 1993 to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the Treaty of Lausanne.