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War Aims and War Aims Discussions (Russian Empire)

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Russia reluctantly entered the Great War to preserve its status as a great power. However, once the fighting began, it was the first amongst the Allies to state its territorial desiderata, which were to annex lands along the borders of Germany and Austria-Hungary. After Turkey's entry in the conflict, Russia's main ambition became gaining control of the straits linking the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. Although this had long been a major goal of Romanov diplomacy, it was not universally shared amongst the tsar's officials. For the army, top priority remained destroying Germany as a great power.

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Introduction

We will never know what truly motivated [Russia](#) to prepare for war in July 1914.^[1] However, divining its objectives once the fighting began is more feasible. The autocracy's own deliberations as well as

relevant discussions with its allies are extensively recorded in the many document collections and diaries that have been published in the intervening century. What is particularly striking is that Russia's war aims were hardly unanimous; there were serious differences of opinion about the war's priorities, even at the highest levels. Nowhere was the divide wider than between generals and diplomats.

The July Crisis

The fateful decision to prepare for a war was taken on 24 July 1914 at a meeting of the Council of Ministers in St. Petersburg.^[2] That morning Count Frigyes Szápolyai (1869-1935), the Austrian ambassador, had visited Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov (1860-1927) to deliver a copy of the harsh ultimatum his government had just handed the Serbian government in response to the Habsburg heir's assassination by a Serbian terrorist in Sarajevo nearly a month earlier. Because of its close ties to the southern Slav kingdom, the demands also came as a major challenge to Russia's prestige as a great power.

After conferring with the British and French ambassadors over lunch, Sazonov joined his colleagues at 3:00 pm.^[3] As foreign minister he had the first word. Sazonov explained that Russia had been repeatedly bullied by "arrogant" German diplomacy since its defeat in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. Russia had invariably yielded, but now it was time to stop. Were the empire to give way once again, "she would henceforth have to take second place among the Powers." The only alternative was to stand by Serbia, though the minister warned that this might well lead to a confrontation with both Germany and Austria-Hungary. Indeed, upon learning about the Austrian ultimatum earlier in the day, Sazonov had exclaimed, "*c'est la guerre européenne!*"^[4] Nevertheless, he clearly favoured firmness.

One by one the other ministers agreed with Sazonov's logic that Russia must take a strong stand. General Vladimir Sukhomlinov (1848-1926) and Admiral Ivan Grigorovich (1853-1930), respectively responsible for the army and the navy, pointed out that the military had not yet fully recovered its full strength from the fiasco in the far east ten years earlier; it certainly was no match for the combined forces of the two Germanic powers. Nevertheless, they concurred, "hesitation was no longer appropriate." Despite his concerns about the damage war might inflict on the economy, Finance Minister Peter Bark (1869-1937) acknowledged, "Russia's honour, dignity and survival as a great power were at stake." The council's members accordingly resolved to mobilise the Kiev military district, which bordered directly on Austria, as well as Odessa, Moscow, and Kazan.

The next morning, Nicholas II, Emperor of Russia (1868-1918) convened a second Council of Ministers. Now joined by the chief of the general staff, General Ianushkevich, and the district's commander (as well as the tsar's cousin once removed), Nikolai Nikolaevich, Grand Duke of Russia (1856-1929), the group confirmed the previous day's decision for a partial mobilisation and took more measures to prepare the empire for war. When it was first ordered on 28 July in response to

Austria's declaration of war against Serbia, the mobilisation was only directed at the Dual Monarchy. Two days later, after some hesitation, the tsar ordered a general mobilisation and dismissed the demands of his German cousin, Wilhelm II, German Emperor (1859-1941), to rescind the command. Within another two days, on 1 August, Germany declared war on Russia.

Nicholas clearly understood that putting his armed forces on a war footing risked a clash with the Central European allies. Some historians have detected an ulterior motive for the emperor's gamble. According to the patriarch of Leninist historiography, Mikhail Pokrovskii (1868-1932), "it must be clear to even moderately perceptive people that the objective of both Russia's autocracy and society for the war of 1914 was Constantinople, a fight for the 'Turkish inheritance.'"^[5] When Soviet academe took a more nationalist turn under Joseph Stalin (1878-1953) in the 1930s, Pokrovskii's compatriots disavowed his thesis about tsarist war guilt and it now also finds little favour among scholars in the West.

The emperor, many of his civilian officials, and much of civil society certainly came to see possession of the [Turkish Straits and Constantinople](#) as Russia's just reward for defeating the Central Powers when the Ottomans joined the confrontation that Autumn. But war aims are not always constant and can evolve over time. By the same token, they are not necessarily synonymous with *casus belli*.

The most plausible explanation for Nicholas' order to mobilise his troops was to salvage his empire's waning standing on the continent. While his manifesto of 2 August announcing the war proclaimed, "We have now to intercede not only for a related country, unjustly attacked," it added, "but also to safeguard the honour, dignity, and integrity of Russia, and her position among the great powers."^[6] In the words of A.J.P. Taylor (1906-1990), the empire took up arms "to survive as a great power."^[7]

Immediate Ambitions

Russia was the first among the allies to declare its war aims. These made no mention of the Straits for the very simple reason that [Turkey](#) was still at peace. On 14 September, within six weeks of the outbreak of hostilities, Sazonov had a "most friendly conversation" with Sir George Buchanan (1854-1924) and Maurice Paléologue (1859-1944), the British and French ambassadors respectively.^[8] He explained that he wanted to share his "unofficial thoughts" about how the three allies should plan for the post-war order. Sazonov pointed out that their main objective was to "break Germany's power and its claim to military and political hegemony." At the same time, territorial changes would have to respect the principle of nationality.

The minister then went on with some suggestions about redrawing the map in favour of the victors. Of course, [Alsace and Lorraine](#) would be returned to [France](#), as would [Schleswig-Holstein](#) to [Denmark](#), while Hannover would be restored as an independent kingdom. Meanwhile, the Dual Monarchy would be split up into three separate components, Austria, Bohemia, and Hungary, while

Serbia would acquire Bosnia, Herzegovina, Dalmatia, and northern [Albania](#). There would also be some adjustments to other Balkan borders, while [Britain](#), [France](#), and [Japan](#) would divide Germany's colonies amongst themselves.

Sazonov also divulged Russia's desiderata. These included annexing the Lower Niemen River basin from Germany as well as Eastern Galicia from Austria. Meanwhile, the Kingdom of [Poland](#) would also gain lands from the losers. The latter came in the context of an unusual proclamation in early August by the army's commander-in-chief, Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich. In a manifesto that had been composed by the foreign ministry to all Poles under German, Austrian, and Russian rule, he called on them to unite in an autonomous state "under the sceptre of the Russian tsar...free in faith, language and self-rule."^[9] Although conservatives opposed it, the Grand Duke's appeal was designed to strengthen the loyalty of a nation whose loyalty remained questionable.

Many doubted the sincerity of Nikolai Nikolaevich's summons, but its authors at the Chorister's Bridge were probably in earnest. In January 1914, well before the war's outbreak, Sazonov had already called on the emperor to avoid short-sighted [nationalism](#) in the interests of promoting Slav solidarity both at home and abroad. He urged him to satisfy Polish desires for self-rule, schooling in their own language, and the right to worship according to their Catholic faith.^[10] As for its implementation, Russia's "great retreat" from Poland in 1915 made it largely moot.

Galicia and Poland were hardly at the forefront of most Russians' thoughts about why they were fighting the Central Powers. Even though Turkey was still at peace, some statesmen hinted that Constantinople and the Straits might also be included among the war aims. Almost as an afterthought, two weeks after Sazonov's chat with Buchanan and Paléologue about his wishes, [Alexander Krivoshein \(1857-1921\)](#), Nicholas' minister of agriculture, informed the ambassadors that Russia's vision of the peace also included driving the Turks entirely out of Europe and making Constantinople a [neutral](#) city.^[11] Sir George noted that Krivoshein even ventured "that he would personally be glad if the Turks declared war on Russia, as then the Turkish question would be finally settled."^[12]

Turkey Enters the War

Until the end of October, the foreign minister endeavoured to keep the Ottomans neutral. However, the agriculture minister got his wish at the end of October when Turkish warships shelled several Black Sea ports and laid minefields. Russia's declaration of war on 2 November almost immediately added Turkey to its war aims. In his proclamation, Nicholas announced,

along with the entire Russian people we steadfastly believe that Turkey's reckless involvement in the conflict only hastens its inevitable fate and opens for Russia the path to resolving the historical task our ancestors bequeathed us on the Black Sea's shores.^[13]

The tsar did not exaggerate. Britain's ambassador recalled that public opinion now "turned to Constantinople as the one great prize to be won by the war."^[14] The same issue of the business daily *Birzhevyia vedomosti* that published the text of Nicholas' manifesto included Sergei Gorodetskii's (1884-1967) poem "Tsargrad," which foresaw Constantinople finally liberated and the "impudent half-moon" on Hagia Sophia replaced by the Cross.^[15] Paul Miliukov (1859-1943), one of the Duma's leading liberals, announced that Turkey's entry into the war would help "fulfil the ancient goal of our Near Eastern ambitions," which consisted of "putting the Bosphorus and Dardanelles entirely under Russian control, together with Constantinople and enough land on the shores to defend the Straits."^[16]

The sentiment was eagerly shared at the Chorister's Bridge. In November Nicholas de Basily (1883–1963), a senior diplomat with close ties to Sazonov, wrote a lengthy memorandum titled "Our Goals on the Straits," which described in detail both their economic and strategic importance. Without necessarily annexing them, he explained "the Question of the Straits can be definitively settled only by establishing our complete and direct authority over the Bosphorus, the Dardanelles and some of the Aegean islands with sufficient hinterland to provide for the stability of our possession."^[17]

Not surprisingly, many naval officers concurred. Captain Aleksandr Nemitz (1879-1967), who also served as the admiralty's liaison with the foreign ministry went further and pressed for more direct control in a memorandum he wrote that month. His vision of the post-war settlement saw the Ottoman capital under Russian rule, albeit as an autonomous, neutral city.^[18]

Meanwhile, Sazonov began to enlist the support of his two allies. Despite its previous long-standing opposition to any Russian privileges in Turkey, Britain readily agreed to his desires. Already on 9 November, Britain's foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey (1862-1933), informed the Russian ambassador that if the war ended in victory, it would not object to tsarist control over the Straits. While this was a major volte-face in the kingdom's views on the Eastern Question, it had reconciled itself to this possibility some time ago.

Already in 1903 Britain's Committee for Imperial Defence decided that the right of the tsarist navy to sail past Constantinople would not jeopardise its interest in the eastern Mediterranean. For one thing, since Egypt was a British protectorate the Royal Navy had access to the Suez Canal. Furthermore, as Edward VII, King of Great Britain (1841-1910) and his ambassador to St. Petersburg suggested in 1904, offering the Straits to Russia might be a useful bargaining chip. Once the fighting began, the *quid pro quo* was Petrograd's consent to continued British control over Egypt, in addition to ensuring Russia's continued participation in the war. Acquiring the Ottomans' oil-rich possessions on the Arabian Gulf may also have been a consideration at Whitehall.

France's foreign minister, Théophile Delcassé (1852-1923), was much less sanguine about the matter. His republic had substantial investments in the Ottoman Empire as well as interests in the Levant, which a strong Russian presence might jeopardise. It would take until April 1915 for the French to accept Russia's wishes.

Stavka Begs to Differ

For the army, defeating the Teutonic foe remained top priority. Throughout the struggle, its generals vehemently opposed anything that might distract from their primary task. Oleg Airapetov points out that “this was the only principle question on which [Grand Duke] Nikolai Nikolaevich’s staff and its enemy – War Minister Sukhomlinov- very likely entirely saw eye to eye.”^[19] When on 21 December 1914, Sazonov approached General Nikolai Ianushkevich with a request to detach a large contingent from the [Western Front](#) to seize the Straits, the general staff’s chief negative reply was categorical. “The current situation demands that we devote all of our forces to the main theatre,” he wrote, adding, “the question of reassigning troops to occupy the Bosphorus cannot be considered before we decisively vanquish our western foes.”^[20]

Stavka (the Russian army’s headquarters at the front) never deviated from its position. As the struggle with the Germans became more desperate in 1915, the tsar’s chief of staff, General [Mikhail Alekseev \(1857-1918\)](#), even began to toy with the idea of offering a separate peace to Turkey to free badly needed troops from the Caucasian front.

The army’s reluctance to be distracted by the Allied campaign in the Dardanelles in 1915 confirmed its insistence on devoting full attention to the Western Front. Ironically, the idea of the [Gallipoli Campaign](#) was the brainchild of its commander, Nikolai Nikolaevich. In late December of the previous year, the Russian campaign against Turkey in Anatolia was not going well. The grand duke accordingly asked Sir [John Hanbury-Williams \(1859-1946\)](#), the British liaison at Stavka, whether his government might consider “a demonstration of some kind...[to] alarm the Turks and ease our position on the Caucasus front.”^[21] Sir [Winston Churchill \(1874-1965\)](#), the First Lord of the Admiralty, had already been contemplating an assault on the Dardanelles for some time, and he readily consented to the Grand Duke’s request. However, as General [Nikolai Iudenich \(1862-1933\)](#) halted the Turks’ advance at Sarıkamış in early January 1915, the grand duke began to have second thoughts.

On 24 January Hanbury-Williams again met with Nikolai Nikolaevich in Warsaw to discuss further the Dardanelles campaign. The latter’s response was distinctly less enthusiastic. Not only was the [Black Sea Fleet](#) far too weak to assist the Royal Navy, but he also stressed that he had never committed his army to join the operation. Sazonov also put pressure on Stavka to support the British, but was similarly rebuffed.

General Quartermaster [Iurii Danilov \(1866-1937\)](#) eventually relented to pressure from the emperor and in February agreed to order a corps from the Caucasus, should the Allies be successful in their assault on Gallipoli. But even then, the effort was half-hearted. Within a month, Stavka began to divert some of the corps’ brigades for more urgent duties on the Galician front.

The generals were well aware of the need to placate the tsar, who remained enthusiastic about

participating in the Allied operation, and they resorted to subterfuge to deceive their sovereign. During Nicholas' visit in April to inspect the Odessa Military District, which would be the base of Russia's mission to the Bosphorus, he saw the Caucasus Corps elaborately preparing for a mission its commanders knew it would never undertake.

By May 1915, to shore up its effort against the Central Powers' counteroffensive in the west, the entire corps was re-tasked to that front. Three brigades from the Odessa military district would have to suffice for any mission to Turkey. Further reverses against the Central Powers and the ultimate failure of the Allied Gallipoli campaign later that year ended the need for Stavka even to feign interest in the Straits.

The Provisional Government

The [Provisional Government](#) that replaced the monarchy during the [Revolution of March 1917](#) did not abandon Russia's war aims. Already as a parliamentarian under the *ancien régime*, its first foreign minister, the liberal Paul Miliukov, had staunchly advocated annexing the Turkish Straits, and he continued to advocate this policy. By the same token, the political upheavals had not led to a change of heart at the army's high command. General Alekseev, now commander-in-chief, rebuffed the new war minister's efforts to order an amphibious attack on Constantinople.

Miliukov was also opposed by the Petrograd Soviet of Workers and Soldiers' Deputies, a more radical assembly that uneasily shared power with the Provisional Government. While the Soviet initially supported the war effort, it did so only to defend the country and advocated a "peace without annexations or indemnities." The conflict came to a head on 1 May, when Miliukov circulated a note that pledged the Provisional Government, "while safeguarding the nation's rights, will resolutely respect its obligations to the Allies."^[22] Within days, massive protests on the capital's streets soon forced the foreign minister to resign. Now including some prominent socialists, the government appointed a liberal Ukrainian sugar beet magnate, [Mikhail Tereshchenko \(1886-1956\)](#), as his replacement.

At first, the new foreign minister endeavoured to convince the other Allies to abandon their annexationist plans and seek a negotiated peace rather than impose an unconditional surrender on the Central Powers. But he began to prevaricate over time, refusing unilaterally to repudiate the secret treaties Sazonov had negotiated with the British and French about a division of the territorial spoils after the war.

By summer Tereshchenko's wishes were irrelevant, since the Provisional Government was rapidly losing its authority. The offensive its current prime minister, [Aleksandr Kerenskii \(1881-1970\)](#), had ordered in July against the Central Powers soon collapsed, and on the home front living conditions continued to deteriorate. An attempted coup by General [Lavr Kornilov \(1870-1918\)](#) two months later proved to be the *coup de grace*. The Soviets were dominated by the anti-war Bolsheviks, led by [Vladimir Lenin \(1870-1924\)](#). The morning after he easily seized power on the night of 7 November,

Lenin immediately made good on his promise to take Russia out of the war with his Decree on Peace.

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Notes

1. ↑ This article is largely based on my earlier essay, "Russia's War Aims" in: Gestrich, Andreas and Pogge von Strandmann, Hartmut (eds.): *Bid for World Power? New Research on the Outbreak of the First World War*, Oxford 2017, pp. 335-354.
2. ↑ Dates are according to the Gregorian calendar. Russia still adhered to the Julian calendar, which was 13 days behind the Gregorian by the early 20th century. Thus, in St. Petersburg the council met on 11 July.
3. ↑ Bark, Petr: *Vospominaniia poslednogo ministra finansov Rossiiskoi imperii 1914-1917* [Memoirs of the last finance minister of the Russian Empire 1914-1917]. Vol. 1, Moscow 2017, pp. 216-224; Lieven, D.C.B.: *Towards the Flame: Empire, War and the End of Tsarist Russia*, London 2015, pp. 321-324.
4. ↑ "This means a European War!" in: Albertini, Luigi: *The Origins of the War of 1914*. Vol. II. *The Crisis of July 1914*, New York 2005.
5. ↑ Pokrovskii, M.: *Drei Konferenzen (zur Vorgeschichte des Krieges)*, Berlin 1920, p. 3.
6. ↑ Tsar Nicholas: *Imperial Manifesto*, Documents of Russian History, online: http://archive.org/stream/documentsofrussi027937mbp/documentsofrussi027937mbp_djvu.txt (retrieved: 25 July 2017).
7. ↑ Taylor, A.J.P.: *The War Aims of the Allies in the First World War*, in: Pares, Richard and Taylor, A.J.P. (eds.): *Essays Presented to Sir Lewis Namier*. London 1956, p. 475.
8. ↑ Popov, A.L.: *Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia v epokhe imperializma* [International Relations in the Era of Imperialism]. Ser. III, vol. 6, pt. 1, Moscow and Leningrad 1931-38, pp. 247-248. (Hereafter MOEI.)
9. ↑ Ignat'ev, A.V. et al. (eds.): *Istoriia vneshnei politiki Rossii konets XIX-nachalo XX veka* [The History of Russian Foreign Policy from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century], Moscow 1997, p. 480.
10. ↑ Popov, MOEI. Ser. 3, vol. 1 1931-38, pp. 61-64.
11. ↑ Popov, MOEI. Ser. 3, vol. 6, pt. 1 1931-38, p. 313.
12. ↑ In Bobroff, Ronald P.: *Roads to Glory: Later Imperial Russia and the Turkish Straits*, London 2006, p. 112.
13. ↑ Adamov, E.A.: *Konstantinopol' i Prolivy po sekretnym dokumentam b. Ministersta inostrannykh del'* [Constantinople and the Straits According to Secret documents of the Former Ministry of Foreign Affairs]. Vol. 1, 364 n4, Moscow 1925
14. ↑ Buchanan, Sir George: *My Mission to Russia*. Vol. 1, London 1923, p. 224.

15. ↑ In Hellman, Ben: *Poets of Hope and Despair: The Russian Symbolists in War and Revolution (1914-1918)*, Helsinki 1995.
16. ↑ In Adamov, *Konstantinopol' i prolivy [Constantinople and the Straits]*, vol. 1 1925, pp. 89-90.
17. ↑ *Ibid.*, pp. 156-181.
18. ↑ *Ibid.*, pp. 181-195.
19. ↑ Airapetov, O.R.: *Sud'ba Bosforskoi ekspeditsii v pravlenie Nikolaia II [The Fate of the Bosphorus Expedition during the Reign of Nicholas II]*, in: Airapetov, O.R. (ed.): *Posledniaia voina imperatorskii Rossii [Imperial Russia's Last War]*, Moscow 2002, p. 215.
20. ↑ Adamov, *Konstantinopol' i prolivy* vol. 2 1925, pp. 115-122.
21. ↑ Hanbury-Williams, John: *The Emperor Nicholas II: As I Knew Him*, London 1922, p. 23.
22. ↑ Lavrov, S.V. et al. (eds.): *Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Rossii v Pervoi mirovoi voiny: Sbornik dokumentov [The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the First World War]*, Tula 2014, p. 346.

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