

Goeben, SMS and Breslau, SMS

By [Benjamin Miertzschke](#)

Summary

The flight of the German battlecruiser Goeben and the light cruiser Breslau from the Adriatic Sea to the Dardanelles was one of the most spectacular and memorable naval operations during the initial phase of the war. The arrival of the ships contributed significantly to the Ottomans' decision to join sides with the Central Powers.

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The Mediterranean Division

The Goeben, a Moltke-class battlecruiser commissioned in July 1912, and the Breslau, a light cruiser of the Magdeburg class commissioned in May the same year, together formed the core of the Mediterranean Division of the Imperial German Navy. The division had been established and dispatched in November 1912 to safeguard European interests in the [Ottoman Empire](#) after the outbreak of the [First Balkan War](#), contributing to a concerted action of the Great Powers. The ships took part in the international [naval](#) blockade during the siege of Scutari ([Albania](#)) in spring 1913 and the following peace mission. The outbreak of the Second Balkan War in summer 1913 called for an extension of the division's deployment in the region. From October 1913 on, Rear Admiral [Wilhelm Souchon \(1864-1946\)](#) served as the Mediterranean Division's commander.

Escape to Constantinople

In July 1914, the Goeben was staying at the Austro-Hungarian naval base of Pola to undergo urgent maintenance work. After hostilities between [Austria-Hungary](#) and [Serbia](#) had commenced on July 28, Souchon at first considered steaming back to [Germany](#) to reunite with the [High Seas Fleet](#). On the way, he received orders from the German Imperial Admiralty

Staff on August 3 to set course for Constantinople instead, after secret negotiations had been made with Ottoman War Minister [Enver Pasha \(1881-1922\)](#). However, already being near the African coast, Souchon decided to shell at least the ports of Philippeville and Bône to thwart French troop [transports](#). After doing so in the early morning of August 4, the Goeben and Breslau headed to Messina to refill their coal bunkers. On their way, the ships encountered the British battlecruisers Indomitable and Inflexible, yet with the British ultimatum not expiring before midnight, both nations were still officially at peace. After coaling at Messina, the Goeben and Breslau continued their journey to Constantinople. Following the British declaration of war, separate pursuits by the British light cruisers Gloucester and Dublin, aided by two destroyers, ended fruitlessly as the German ships strained their engines to the uttermost. A planned interception by the British 1st Cruiser Squadron, encompassing the armored cruisers Defence, Black Prince, Duke of Edinburgh and Warrior, was abandoned by the squadron commander Admiral [Ernest Troubridge \(1862-1926\)](#), the calibres of his old ships presenting no match for the Goeben. Unchallenged, the Goeben and Breslau arrived at the Dardanelles on August 10. Since the Ottoman Empire was still officially neutral, the German [government](#) offered to incorporate the ships into the Ottoman Navy to circumvent [neutrality](#) regulations. On August 16, the ships were given the aliases Yavuz Sultan Selim (Goeben) and Midilli (Breslau).

Strategic and Political Importance

The arrival of the ships in Constantinople was a decisive step in drawing the Ottoman Empire closer to the side of the Central Powers. The Ottomans, especially Naval Minister [Djemal Pasha \(1872-1922\)](#), had long cherished the dream of possessing a modern navy, both for reasons of prestige and as a counterweight against [Russia](#) and [Greece](#). Aware of this, the German government promised to give the Goeben and Breslau as substitutes for two Turkish battleships, the Reshadije und Osman I, which had been built in [Britain](#) but were confiscated by the British [government](#) at the outbreak of war. Finally, it was agreed that despite steaming under the Ottoman flag, both the Goeben and Breslau would remain German possessions until the war ended. They kept their German crews and remained under the command of Admiral Souchon, who was subsequently made commander-in-chief of the Ottoman Navy.

This way, the presence of the Goeben and Breslau in Ottoman waters formed an integral part and a visible symbol of the German-Ottoman alliance.

The Goeben and Breslau were of key strategic importance as their presence significantly changed the [power](#) balance in the Black Sea in favour of the Ottomans. By keeping the Russian Black Sea Fleet at bay, the ships also offered rear cover during the Entente's

[Dardanelles and Gallipoli campaign](#), thus helping to prevent supplies from reaching Russia via the Black Sea. The mere presence of the Goeben and Breslau played a vital role in securing the Central Powers' southern front line, indirectly contributing to the Russian collapse in 1917. Beyond that, the Imperial German Navy planned to establish the Ottoman Empire as a permanent cornerstone in its future post-war strategy and used the promise to sell the ships for good as leverage to push for a naval convention and concessions to acquire dockyards and supply bases. However, the realization of these plans was finally thwarted by the outcome of the war.

Operations in the Black Sea and the Aegean Sea 1914-1918

On 29 October 1914, a fighting force comprising the Goeben, Breslau and several smaller units of the Ottoman Navy raided the Russian ports of Sevastopol, Odessa and Novorossiysk, provoking the Russian declaration of war against the Ottoman Empire on November 2. On November 18, the Goeben and Breslau were engaged in a skirmish against five pre-dreadnoughts of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. In the following months, both ships were used for several missions into the Black Sea and to safeguard Ottoman shipping. In late 1915, the tide turned with the commissioning of the Russian Imperatritsa Mariya-class battleships, which outgunned the German ships, but the Goeben and Breslau, due to their superior speed, were able to avoid serious confrontations with these Russian dreadnoughts. After the [Russian Revolution](#), the Goeben and Breslau became available for missions into the Eastern Mediterranean. On 20 January 1918, Vice-Admiral [Hubert von Rebeur-Paschwitz \(1863-1933\)](#), who had replaced Souchon in September 1917, took the Goeben and Breslau out of the Dardanelles to attack British ships near Imbros, where he sunk two British monitors but got stuck in a minefield shortly thereafter. The Breslau was lost after hitting several [mines](#), while the Goeben, though suffering three mine hits as well, managed to keep afloat. On its way back, the ship ran aground on a sandbank and suffered multiple [air](#) attacks. Heavily damaged, it arrived in Constantinople by January 27. In June 1918, the Goeben went to the now German-occupied port of Sevastopol and was docked for maintenance. In early July, the ship returned to Constantinople, where further repairs were carried out until the end of the war. In October 1918, the German Supreme Navy Command intended to use the ship for a last desperate mission against the British fleet, but on November 2 the Goeben was finally handed to the Turkish [government](#).

The Fate of the Goeben

After the war, the damaged Goeben remained anchored in Constantinople for many years. Following extensive repair and modernization in the newly founded Gölcük Naval Shipyard,

the ship was recommissioned as the Yavuz in 1930. As the flagship of the Turkish Navy, it served on several diplomatic missions and ceremonial occasions during the 1930s and 1940s. In 1950 the ship was decommissioned and entered the reserve fleet. In 1954, the Yavuz was finally dropped from the navy register and turned into a [museum](#) ship. In 1965, the Turkish government put the ship on auction to be sold for scrap, but no bidders came forth. In the early 1970s, private initiatives were launched in Germany to acquire the ship for use as a museum, but these failed due to a lack of funds. Being the last remaining capital ship of the Imperial German High Seas Fleet, the Goeben/Yavuz was finally scrapped in Turkey between 1973 and 1976.

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External Links

- [„Goeben“ und „Breslau“ unter osmanischer Flagge \(Welt\) \(Image\)](#)
- [Mark: The Escape of the Goeben and Breslau, 22 July 2014 \(Royal Museums Greenwich\) \(Article\)](#)

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LC Subject Headings

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Rameau Subject Headings

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[Souchon, Wilhelm](#); [Troubridge, Ernest](#); [Rebeur-Paschwitz, Hubert von](#); [Cemal Paşa, Ahmed](#); [Enver Pasha, Ismail](#)

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[Dardanelles](#); [Scutari \(Shkodër\)](#); [Pula \(Pola\)](#); [Constantinople \(Istanbul\)](#); [Philippeville \(Skikda\)](#); [Bône \(Annaba\)](#); [Messina](#); [Sevastopol](#); [Odessa](#); [Novorossiysk](#)

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