

Constantinople Agreement

By [Pınar Üre](#)

The Constantinople Agreement, alternatively known as the Straits or Istanbul Agreement, was a secret agreement concluded between Britain, Russia, and France on 18 March 1915. The most important stipulation of the agreement was the Allies' promise to give Constantinople as a war prize to Russia in the event of Allied victory.

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Constantinople in the Russian Imagination

Constantinople, or Tsargrad in Slavic languages, occupied an important place in Russian imperial thinking since [Catherine II, Empress of Russia's \(1729-1796\)](#) reign in the 18th century. Throughout the next century, the conquest of the holy seat of the Orthodox Patriarchate and reviving the Byzantine Empire from its ashes in a Russified form remained a shared ideal among many Russian statesmen, academics, and writers. Intellectuals and public figures from different walks of life, people as diverse as [Fyodor Dostoyevsky \(1821-1881\)](#) and [Pavel Milyukov \(1859-1943\)](#), dedicated their writing to explaining why the conquest of Constantinople was a historical and political necessity for [Russia](#). Although Russian forces came to the edges of the city after the 1877-1878 Russian-Ottoman War, they were stopped by European diplomacy. World War I brought conditions ripe to revive this [imperial](#) dream. The conquest of the city seemed so imminent to some Russians that right after the war started in 1914, the director of the Russian Archaeological Institute in Constantinople, [Fyodor Uspenskii \(1845-1928\)](#), even called for the establishment of a commission to oversee the investigation and preservation of Byzantine monuments in Constantinople once victorious Russian forces entered the city. In anticipation of a Russian victory at the end of the war, a committee was indeed established in 1914 to study and preserve the archaeological monuments in Constantinople and its environs. It was chaired by the President of the Imperial Academy of Sciences [Konstantin Konstantinovich, Grand Duke of Russia \(1858-1915\)](#).

Diplomatic Relations between the Allies and Secret Agreements

Russian preparations for capturing Constantinople after the war were not only based in dreams. The Ottoman capital's strategic location linking the Black Sea to the Mediterranean made it indispensable to the great powers of Europe. This strategic importance forced Russian diplomats to exert caution and restrict their [nationalist](#) fervour so as not to antagonize other European powers. However, World War I radically altered the conditions and opened up new possibilities for imperial Russian foreign policy.

Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs during the war, [Sergey Sazonov \(1860-1927\)](#), emphasized the importance of Constantinople and the Straits for Russia and laid claims on the city once the war started in 1914. The conservative [Nicholas II, Emperor of Russia \(1868-1918\)](#) was also sympathetic to these ideas. In a bold attempt to solidify his policy, Sazonov sent a secret memorandum to London and Paris in March 1915 to underline Russian claims to Constantinople and the Straits. In exchange,

Russians consented to British and French desires for [Ottoman lands in the Middle East](#).

For its part, [Britain](#) tried to prevent the possibility of Russian dominance over the Straits for much of the 19th century. However, the crisis of 1914 changed British perceptions. Threatened by the possibility of a separate Russian peace with [Germany](#), British Foreign Secretary [Edward Grey \(1862-1933\)](#) tried to keep the Russian Foreign Ministry as content as possible once the war started. Grey's determined support for Russian claims soothed the French, who were more suspicious of Russian designs on the Mediterranean. Grey's policy to keep Britain's allies content by tacitly agreeing to their territorial demands led to a series of secret treaties between the British, French, and Russians during the war.

While acquiescing to Russian designs, British and French diplomats also used the opportunity to extract mutual benefits for their respective [empires](#). While they approved Russian demands regarding Constantinople, in turn, they received Russian approval for French claims on Syria and British claims on oil-rich [Persia](#) and [Mesopotamia](#). According to the agreement signed on 18 March 1915, old Constantinople within the historic city walls, which contained a large number of Byzantine monuments, most notably Hagia Sophia, would be handed over to Russians, along with the Straits.

While [British](#) and [French plans](#) to establish zones of influence in the Middle East became a reality after the war, [Russia's](#) dreams to capture Constantinople were never realized. Contrary to the expectation of the Allies, the Ottomans were not easily defeated, as the [Gallipoli campaign of 1915](#) proved. Second, the disarray in the Russian military and the subsequent [revolutions of 1917](#) made imperial dreams irrelevant. With the Bolshevik takeover in November 1917, the new leaders of Russia pledged to withdraw from the war, and ultimately made a separate peace with Germany in March 1918 in the town of [Brest-Litovsk](#). The Bolsheviks' revelation of the secret treaties after the revolution caused embarrassment on the part of the Allies and resentment on the part of Turkish statesmen and officers.

The Constantinople Agreement was the first in a series of secret agreements concluded during World War I between the Allies to partition Ottoman lands. Had it not been for the Russian Revolutions of 1917, it is possible that Constantinople and the Straits would have been given to Russia at the end of the war. While the 1916 [Sykes-Picot Agreement](#) between Britain and [France](#) is quite well known, the Constantinople Agreement did not achieve the same level of fame. In fact, these two secret treaties were parallel in their content and complemented each other. France and Britain first had to appease their partner, Russia, in order to finalize the partitioning of the Middle East, as they later did with the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

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