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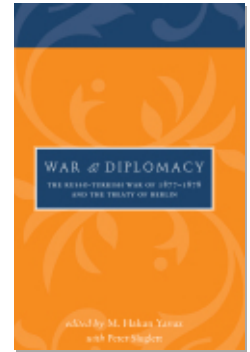
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Benevolent Contempt

Bismarck's Ottoman Policy

Sean McMeekin

The views expressed by Germany's iron chancellor on the Eastern question are justly notorious. Few students of diplomatic history have not heard Bismarck's bon mot that "the entire Orient [*den ganzen Orient*] is not worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier" — although many mistakenly believe that he was referring to the Balkans, full stop, rather than the Ottoman Empire in its entirety.¹ Otto von Bismarck's Machiavellian "Reinsurance Treaty" of 1887 even contained a clause promising that the Germans would remain neutral if the Russians again tried to seize Constantinople as they nearly had in 1878. The chancellor's dismissive view of Turkey's strategic importance seems of a piece with his only slightly less famous disregard for Africa, expressed to the explorer Eugen Wolff: "my map of Africa lies in Europe. Here is Russia and here is France, and we [Germany] are in the middle; that is my map of Africa."²

And yet, despite his supposed contempt for the Ottoman Empire and Africa, Bismarck presided over two Berlin congresses dealing with one and then the other, in 1878 and 1884. He not only went along with Germany's acquisition of African colonies in the 1880s but also approved the dispatch of a German military mission at Sultan Abdülhamid II's request in 1882, which planted the potent seed of German influence in the Ottoman army. Germany's famous investment in Ottoman strategic rail began in the Bismarckian, not the Wilhelmine, era: the first stretch of the Baghdad Railway, from Istanbul to İzmit, was completed in 1872. The original Anatolian Railway Company was incorporated in 1889, while Bismarck was still in office.

What are we to make of Bismarck's actual policies vis-à-vis the Ottoman Empire, which seem to contradict his public statements so

blatantly? This paper argues that, far from dismissing Turkey's strategic importance, Bismarck in fact felt it only too keenly. The key to the apparent puzzle of Bismarck's Ottoman policy is the vast gulf between what he saw as Ottoman Turkey's minimal importance for Germany and its colossal importance for other powers — Austria, Russia, and France, which were themselves deeply entangled with Germany. (Britain, like Turkey itself, factored into German calculations only at second remove, via its rivalries with Russia and France.) Bismarck's genius, and his curse, was to perceive sooner than anyone else the danger that a collapse of Ottoman authority in the Balkans would provoke a general European war. Preventing such a conflict was his overriding priority from the time of Germany's unification in 1871 until his fall from power in 1890. It is thus not surprising that Bismarck's most famous diplomatic triumph came at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, when he mediated a settlement that (for all its ugly horse-trading at Turkish expense) helped preserve the Ottoman Empire — and the peace of Europe — for a quarter-century.

Unlike his encouragement of German imperialism in Africa, which truly *was* cynical, following the Berlin Conference Bismarck quietly but genuinely promoted the expansion of German influence in Turkey. His goal was to shore up its defenses in order to ward off the predatory intentions of other powers. To do this while not alarming Austria and Russia — France could easily exploit another eastern crisis to attack Germany — was a difficult but not impossible task for Bismarck's unsentimental *Realpolitik*. It proved beyond the abilities of Kaiser Wilhelm II, whose sentimental attachment to the Ottoman Empire paradoxically led him to become an unwitting catalyst in its destruction.

To understand Bismarck's Ottoman policy at the Berlin Conference of 1878, it is necessary to examine his actions during the Balkan crisis that led up to it. From what we know of the diplomatic fallout of the Berlin Treaty — Russia's notorious resentment at the overturning of its own victorious Treaty of San Stefano with the Ottomans, a "defeat" that many in St. Petersburg blamed on Bismarck — we might expect that the chancellor had discouraged Russia from intervening.³ This, however, is quite far from the case. Bismarck in fact initially greeted the news of unrest in the Balkans in 1875 as a welcome distraction from what he saw as an unhealthy obsession in Europe's chancelleries with the Franco-German question (it is noteworthy that Bismarck himself, fearing just this, had not wanted to annex Alsace-Lorraine in 1871: he was overruled by the military). In much the same way in which he would later encourage colonial gamesmanship in

the “Scramble for Africa” to keep France embroiled with Britain, Bismarck believed that a Balkan crisis could lead to closer relations with London at France’s expense. For this reason, after the first rumblings of an Ottoman crisis in 1875 — the Bosnian uprising in the summer and the Porte’s default on debt interest payments in October — Bismarck offered Germany’s unprompted endorsement of Britain’s buyout of the Suez Canal company in November 1875 and instructed Lord Odo Russell, Britain’s ambassador, to propose a sweeping agreement on Balkan issues to British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli. The territorial details of this would-be settlement, Germany’s chancellor informed Disraeli, mattered not at all: the powers could agree on either the maintenance of the status quo on Ottoman Europe or its ruthless partition: the important thing was that the powers reach an agreement on “what was to be done with Turkey.”⁴

During the entire Balkan crisis that unfolded, Bismarck’s basic position of disinterest toward territorial changes never wavered. With remarkable prescience (and a dose of his famous cynicism) Bismarck’s “offer” to Disraeli in January 1876 anticipated the basic Balkan settlement reached two years — and two wars — later, with Russian gains in Bessarabia offset by Austrian control of (though not sovereignty over) Bosnia-Herzegovina. Whether Russia went to war with Ottoman Turkey or not was a matter of equal indifference to Bismarck: in fact at one point in September 1876 he all but encouraged St. Petersburg to attack, so long as this was done with Austrian approval.⁵ It was not that Bismarck particularly desired either the preservation of Ottoman territorial integrity or its violent dismemberment through Russian aggression. In his view the principal German interest, rather, lay in controlling the Balkan crisis so as to prevent the *European* powers from going to war with each other. Because the state he served had no natural frontiers offering a defense against invasion by any of the potentially hostile powers encircling its borders (France, Denmark, and Austria had all recently lost territory to Prussia/Germany), Bismarck was willing to pay almost any price to avoid diplomatic perturbations that might plunge Europe into war. As Lord Odo Russell explained Bismarck’s Ottoman policy to London in 1877, “suffice it to say that he is quite ready to divide Turkey for the sake of keeping Germany together.”⁶

To modern sensibilities, these episodes in Bismarckian *Realpolitik* seem brazen, if not downright offensive. What business was it of Germany’s chancellor to broach plans for partitioning Ottoman Turkey between Austria and Russia — to Britain’s prime minister? On what logical, let alone moral or ethical grounds, did third-party Bismarck presume the right to sanctify a Russian war of aggression mounted in the name

of “Christianity” against Muslim Turkey, adding only the condition that a fourth party, Austria, give its consent? Certainly contempt is not too strong a word to describe this sort of posture toward the fate of a large multiethnic, multifaith empire that straddled Europe, Asian Anatolia, and the modern Middle East. As Bismarck himself summarized his Ottoman policy in October 1876, “the question as to whether we can come to an agreement on the Oriental rough-and-tumble with England, still more with Austria, and most of all with Russia, is for the future of Germany infinitely more important than Turkey’s treatment of its subjects and its relations with the European powers.”⁷ Or as he notoriously told the Reichstag just two months later, “the entire Orient is not worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier.”

Unattractive as all this may seem to modern sensibilities, Bismarck’s Ottoman policy contained much good sense. It was not that Bismarck wished Turkey, or Turks, ill. Even as he was sounding out Disraeli on ways in which the powers might agree on partitioning the Ottoman Empire, the chancellor told Britain’s ambassador to Berlin that “he did not agree with those who said: ‘Things are too bad to last so any longer’; in his opinion Turkey might yet be kept together with a little good-will.”⁸ The coldness with which Bismarck viewed the diplomatic chessboard left him immune to the fashionable anti-Turkish sentiments of the day. To Disraeli’s own distaste, English public opinion was falling hard for William Gladstone’s famous pamphleteering against the *Bulgarian Horrors*. More ominously, the Russian press was concocting that dangerous blend of Orthodox Christian “Second Rome” messianism and pan-Slavic irredentism that convinced Tsar Alexander II that his throne would be in jeopardy if he did not do battle for “Christendom,” just as Nicholas II would later fatefully believe that he could not fail to mobilize his armies for Serbia and Slavdom in 1914. Bismarck, by contrast, remained largely unmoved by the drumbeat of anti-Turkish horror stories coming from Bosnia and Bulgaria. He saw easily through Russia’s efforts to invoke “Europe” and “Christendom” to beatify its crude territorial ambitions in the Balkans, telling Kaiser Wilhelm I that any politician who used such abstractions to justify wars was not to be trusted. Significantly, Bismarck cited the Crimean War to illustrate his point, condemning in that case not the Russians but the “Western powers” (Britain and France) for having sold the conflict as a “European” crusade against Russian barbarism.⁹ Although hardly a pacifist, Bismarck believed fundamentally that “any war, even a victorious war, was a misfortune [*ein Unglück*]. It is always a dangerous game to deploy Beelzebub to drive out the devil.”¹⁰

It was particularly dangerous when Russia played the role of Beelzebub. Bismarck's worst strategic nightmare was that Germany would have to fight a war on two fronts against France and Russia. For this reason the generals in Berlin were gravely concerned *any* time Russia mobilized its army. A little-known aspect of the Ottoman crisis of 1877 is that in January and February, while Russia was mobilizing against Turkey, the Prussian General Staff undertook intensive preparations for a two-front war. With strategic insight no less prescient than Bismarck's diplomatic anticipation, Helmuth von Moltke the Elder drew up a mobilization timetable for knocking France out first before wheeling around to face Russia, which was eerily similar to the modified Schlieffen Plan that his son, Moltke the Younger, would actually deploy in 1914. The great Moltke, like the great Bismarck, had the kind of wisdom born of a tragic sense of life, which led them to prepare for the worst-case scenario in order not to have to live through it.¹¹

In an ideal world, Bismarck would rather that St. Petersburg had not intervened in the Balkan crisis — or, even better, that the Bosnian and Bulgarian uprisings of 1875 and 1876 and the vigorous Ottoman response following the declaration of war by Serbia and Montenegro on June 30, 1876, and the refusal of the Turks to buckle to European pressure the following winter had never happened, giving Russia cause to do so. Failing this, Bismarck would much have preferred that Disraeli mediate the burgeoning crisis himself — after all, keeping Russian imperial ambitions in check had been a cardinal objective of British foreign policy for decades. But the British response to Bismarck's overtures in this direction in 1876 was “cool and dilatory.”¹² Playing his own version of *Realpolitik*, Disraeli was happy to watch from the sidelines. Why should a British prime minister be obliged to solve Bismarck's Balkan dilemmas for him? In the end it would be up to the chancellor himself to navigate a path for Germany between the treacherous shoals of Russian ambition and Austrian jealousy.

Short of Germany itself declaring war on St. Petersburg, Bismarck could have done nothing after Russia declared war on Turkey on April 24, 1877, but wait and see what the clash of arms would bring. And nothing is just what he did. One of the strangest facts of the entire Balkan crisis is that the German chancellor who famously hosted the conference that brought it to a close was on sick leave from April 1877 to February 1878, ailing from his chronic neuralgia, rheumatism, shingles, and sleeplessness. Bismarck was effectively out of action, that is, for the entire duration of the Russo-Ottoman War. Whether he used ill health as an excuse to “hide”

and wait out the war or not, it was clear that he wanted no part of Russia's "European" crusade.¹³

If Bismarck had first hoped the Balkan crisis would inject fresh new obsessions into European diplomacy to replace the stale Franco-Prussian antagonism, by the time the crisis came to a head in February 1878, with the Russian army at San Stefano (today's Yeşilköy) and the British fleet poised menacingly in the Sea of Marmara, threatening to intervene if they marched on Constantinople, he was thoroughly weary of the whole thing. As Bismarck had told Lord Odo Russell following the collapse of the short-lived Constantinople summit that had preceded Russia's declaration of war in April 1877, "he never liked conferences, he never expected any useful result from them and as far as he was concerned he would never go to a conference again."¹⁴

While Bismarck's health had improved slightly by the time the diplomats descended on Berlin that June, it is a telling commentary on his condition that each day of the conference he had to force down "two or three beer mugs full of strong port wine" simply in order to "get his blood flowing." Bismarck in 1878 was almost a caricature of an Old World diplomat, world-weary, arrogant, largely inebriated, and yet still able to lead complex multinational negotiations in his own German and two foreign languages (mostly French but also English, as Disraeli did not speak French) simultaneously, while constantly avoiding the merest hint of sentiment about the matters under discussion. Above all, Bismarck insisted that the negotiations be conducted speedily, with no time wasted on issues of less than general interest: his health would not permit them to drag on indefinitely. It is testament to the will of the iron chancellor that the conference was confined to only twenty sessions, lasting one month (June 13 to July 13, 1878).¹⁵

The contrast between Bismarck's sublime indifference to detail and the passionate lobbying of the other diplomats was almost breathtaking. Count Gyula Andrásy, representing Austria-Hungary, moved heaven and earth to wrest Bosnia-Herzegovina from the Turks, whose own diplomats, Alexander Karatheodori Paşa and Sadullah Bey, sought desperately to salvage some scrap of Ottoman Europe from the wreckage of San Stefano. It is largely a matter of taste whether Bismarck showed more contempt to Andrásy or Karatheodori. On Andrásy's cozing up to Disraeli in order to win Balkan gains for Vienna hardly merited by Austria's passivity, the chancellor memorably told Lord Salisbury: "I have heard of people refusing to eat their pigeon unless it was shot and roasted for them, but I have never heard of anyone refusing to eat it unless his jaws were forced open

and it was pushed down his throat.” As Salisbury interpreted Bismarck’s latest bon mot, the chancellor’s objection was that “Andrássy insists not only that the Turk shall cede [Bosnia], but that the Turk shall beg him as a favour to take it. The poor Turks make a wry face.”¹⁶ As for the “poor Turks” themselves, the iron chancellor told an aide at one point that they were wrong to think that it would be advantageous for them if the conference broke off without result: whether it led to war or peace, “the powers will reach agreement at the expense of the Turks.” Still crueller was Bismarck’s aside following a minor incident in which his own (rather large) dog had growled at an unfortunate diplomat: “The dog has not finished his training. He does not know whom to bite. If he did know what to do, he would have bitten the Turks.”¹⁷

Despite appearances, however, the month-long Berlin conference of 1878 saw the first stirrings in Bismarck of a new posture toward the Ottoman Empire. To begin with, although the chancellor had at times seemed disrespectful of the Turkish delegation, according to Josef Maria von Radowitz, director of Oriental Affairs at the Wilhelmstrasse, Karathodori Paşa had won Bismarck’s grudging respect for the “tact and intelligent posture” with which he had defended an impossible position at the conference.¹⁸ And it would be foolish to ignore Bismarck’s role in arranging the final Treaty of Berlin, which, of course, was far from unfavorable to the Porte, breaking up the “Big Bulgaria” of San Stefano into two roughly equal halves, one of which (Eastern Rumelia) was returned to Ottoman suzerainty, along with Macedonia. True, along with Bessarabia the Russians gained Kars, Ardahan, and Batum — the lost provinces of Elviye-i Selâse that so animated nationalist Turks in 1914, much as the French wanted Alsace-Lorraine back. But the Russian prize from the *diktat* peace of San Stefano that Alexander Gorchakov and Peter Shuvalov wanted most to hold onto — control of the Straits or at least unfettered access to the Mediterranean for Russian warships — was firmly denied them. Although this diplomatic defeat for St. Petersburg owed at least as much to British objections as to Bismarck’s machinations, in the coming years most Russian nationalists and pan-Slavists directed their venom at Bismarck, who in this case at least had proved as good a friend as the Turks could have hoped for.

Too much should not be made of these hints of a more pro-Ottoman stance on Bismarck’s part. Bismarck was not opposed per se to a partition of the Ottoman Empire among the European powers, so long as it could be arranged without provoking a European war — but this seemed unlikely in light of the war scare of early 1878. Retaining Russia’s friendship, or at

least its lack of hostility, indeed remained a higher diplomatic priority for Bismarck over his last twelve years in office than relations with Ottoman Turkey. Many volumes have been written on the delicate balancing act between Austria and Russia involved in Bismarck's revival of the Three Emperors' League in 1881 and his concoction of the Byzantine Reinsurance Treaty of 1887, and for good reason. It was a virtuoso performance in balance-of-power diplomacy, well worthy of the attention showered upon it by diplomatic historians.

It is not always understood, however, how central the Eastern question remained to Bismarck's European balancing act and how much his posture *vis-à-vis* the Ottoman Empire shifted after the Congress of Berlin. It was not that his previous indifference turned into any kind of sentimental attachment to Turkey. Rather, the Porte's ability to survive in the face of Russian aggression and European connivance impressed him. Once Russian resentment over the collapse of San Stefano had been temporarily put on ice by the renewal of the Three Emperors' League in 1881 — which reaffirmed the ban on Russian warships entering the Straits and guaranteed Turkey's borders against possible Bulgarian aggression in Macedonia, although leaving the door open for a possible union of Bulgarian and Ottoman Eastern Rumelia — Bismarck worked to build German influence at the Porte. It was an intriguing reversal when Radowitz, the man Bismarck had dispatched 1875 as special emissary to St. Petersburg charged with coordinating German and Russian policy regarding the Balkans, was appointed ambassador to Constantinople in 1882, this time charged with helping firm up Turkish defenses to ward off Russian aggression. Not coincidentally, this was the same year that Bismarck, upon the request of Sultan Abdülhamid II, authorized Gen.-Maj. Otto Kaehler's military mission to Turkey (taken over after Kaehler's death in 1885 by Lt.-Col. Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz, with whose name the venture is usually associated). Bismarck wrote on one of Radowitz's reports that this mission would provide Germany "with influence and informants" in the Ottoman Empire.¹⁹

Bismarck had good reasons for the shift in Ottoman policy. The balance-of-power maneuvering that he had engaged in during the Balkan crisis of 1875–78, by which he sought to supervise a peaceful multipower partition of the Ottoman Empire, had been needlessly complex and had ultimately failed to prevent a dangerous war. Although Russia had nearly taken Constantinople in 1878, the effort had clearly exhausted its forces. A repeat performance was not soon in the cards, as borne out by Russia's humiliation in the Bulgarian crisis of 1885–87, in which Russia failed to

intervene even after its officers and advisors were recalled owing to insubordination by its ungrateful protégé Prince Alexander of Battenberg, who had been placed on the throne by his own uncle, Tsar Alexander II. Austria, meanwhile, had shown an appetite for Turkish territory far larger than its waning military strength warranted. Rather than encouraging pretensions of a sweeping partition of Turkey in Vienna and St. Petersburg, it would be far simpler for the Germans to shore up the Ottoman Empire in order to ward off Russian temptation and thereby prevent a great power conflagration.

As noted above, Bismarck would ideally have preferred that the British play this role, as they had in the past. By the early 1880s, however, it had become painfully evident that this would not happen. Although he had dispatched the fleet in 1878, just in time to prevent the Russian conquest of Constantinople, Disraeli had pointedly refused to take up the Balkan baton that Bismarck had offered him back in 1876, when decisive British intervention could have prevented the Russian invasion that brought Europe to the brink of war. With the advent of the hysterically anti-Turkish Gladstone government in 1880 as well as its invasion and subsequent occupation of Egypt in 1882, Bismarck's last hope was dashed. It was obvious that Britain would not soon return to its previous role as protector of the Porte against Russian encroachment.

While not quite subscribing to the later pan-German embrace of Turkey ("Not a pfennig for a weak Turkey," Paul Rohrbach vowed in his classic primer on *The Baghdad Railway*, "but for a strong Turkey we can give everything!"),²⁰ Bismarck made it clear that he would no longer easily acquiesce in the destruction of the Ottoman Empire by any power that eyed it covetously. This included not only Austria and Russia but also Britain: at the height of the "Great Game" war scare in April 1885 a special German commission was created to revamp Ottoman shore defenses and if necessary mine the Dardanelles, in case the British fleet sought to attack Russia via the Black Sea.²¹ Crowning the new fortifications would be state-of-the-art German artillery, purchased from Mäuser & Lowe, Schichau, and especially Krupp, which sent 440 cannons to Turkey in 1886 alone. Most of the guns reinforced shore batteries at the Bosphorus and Dardanelles; several were also installed on land at the Çatalca lines outside the capital.²²

It is true that Bismarck made gestures in the opposite direction toward St. Petersburg, most notably in the Reinsurance Treaty of June 18, 1887, which included a hidden clause promising German neutrality in case the Russian tsar "judged it necessary" to dispatch a Russian fleet to "protect the entrance to the Black Sea [e.g., through the Bosphorus] and thus to

safeguard Russia's interests." It should be emphasized, however, that this was a "very secret" protocol, designed more to appease Russian suspicions than to commit Germany to any course of action.²³ Like the offers to Disraeli that the chancellor had put on the table prior to the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877, the Reinsurance Treaty cost Bismarck nothing: he was offering things (such as a Russian right of intervention in the Straits) that were not really his to give. Only the chancellor himself, of course, knew which was the "real" Bismarck: the one who was quietly helping the Turks strengthen their Straits defenses or the one who was (even more quietly!) promising not to object if the Russians tried to seize the very same Straits.

While no one can possibly pretend to know what such a complicated man truly believed in his heart of hearts, on balance the evidence suggests that Bismarck was probably more sincere in his efforts to strengthen German influence in Turkey than in purchasing Russian loyalty with specious promises of blanket neutrality. As Herbert von Bismarck, the chancellor's son, who was Germany's state secretary from 1886 to 1890, interpreted the Reinsurance Treaty with a dose of his father's arch-cynicism: "it should, if matters become serious, keep the Russians off our necks six to eight weeks longer than would otherwise be the case."²⁴ From the German perspective, the treaty was mostly about France and Russia, not Turkey: the clause about Russian naval intervention at the Straits was thrown in at the special insistence of Russia's foreign minister, Nikolai Girs.²⁵ If Russia did try to seize the Straits by force, after all, German opposition (or acquiescence) would hardly matter: the Turks would defend the Bosphorus as best they could (unofficially helped by German military advisors). If they held out long enough, the usual coalition of powers not wishing to see Russia control Constantinople would coalesce, doubtless including both Austria and Britain. And all this presumed that the Russians would actually try to seize the Straits, which its current limited naval and amphibious capability in the Black Sea rendered virtually impossible.²⁶ Bismarck's promise of neutrality in case of an operation that had such a small chance of ever occurring does not tell us much about his real views on the matter.

Against these largely symbolic promises to the Russians, we must set Bismarck's real, if largely unpublicized, gestures indicating a commitment to the defense of the Ottoman Empire. Under the able hands of von der Goltz "Paşa" (an honorific given to him in 1895, after ten years' service to the sultan), the Ottoman army was thoroughly reorganized along European and especially German/Prussian lines in the 1880s. The empire was divided up into seven military districts, each assigned a separate numbered army that handled conscription in the area. The first section of reserves

(*redif*) was also structured along German lines to match the organization of the regular army, to make them ready for absorption into the army during wartime. A kind of national or home territorial guard (the *Müstafız*) was added to this, with an extended service term for draftees. All Ottoman army and guard units were better armed now too: not only with Krupp heavy guns but with “hundreds of thousands of modern Mauser rifles,” which replaced the outdated inventory with which the Turks had tried to hold off the Russians in 1877–78. Perhaps most importantly, von der Goltz introduced rigorous officer-training protocols in Turkey, assigning German instructors to the Ottoman Harbiye Academy and sending the most promising Turkish officer-students to the German war academy in Berlin.²⁷

In its first significant conflict following the reforms of Kaehler and von der Goltz Paşa, the 1897 war with Greece, the Turks performed exceptionally well, defeating the Greeks decisively at Domokos (Dömeke) and advancing as far as Thermopylae by May. From there, Edward Erickson believes, the Ottoman army commanded by İbrahim Ethem Paşa could, “in all likelihood, have pushed on rapidly to Athens.”²⁸ That it did not do so was due entirely to European (particularly Russian) diplomatic intervention. It was an ironic turnabout from 1878: this time it was the victorious Turks who were forced to stand down under pressure from concerned outside powers rather than the seemingly unstoppable (but in fact exhausted) Russians. Still, buttressed by the German-led military reforms inaugurated under Bismarck, the Porte had its first real military-diplomatic victory in four decades (much, much longer if we discount the Turks’ Crimean War “victory,” which owed so much to Britain and France), gaining a small part of Greek Thessaly and forcing Athens to pay heavy reparations. Few could have foreseen such a rapid recovery of the Ottoman position after the humiliation of 1877–78.

A little-known factor contributing to the Turkish victory over Greece in 1897 was the use of the German-built Anatolian railway to transport troops from eastern Turkey to the western front. It is true that German investment in Ottoman rail had lain dormant for much of the period when Bismarck was in office, following the completion of the Istanbul-İzmit line in 1872 under the supervision of the Swabian railway engineer Wilhelm von Pressel, known to posterity as the “Father of the Baghdad Railway.” But this was the natural result of the Ottoman bankruptcy of 1875, which dashed the hopes of Pressel and others that the Porte would be able to finance construction of a line to Baghdad or Basra, on the Persian Gulf, across the sparsely inhabited semidesert plains of Anatolia, two forbidding

mountain ranges (the Taurus, north of Adana, and the Amanus range, which guarded the entrance to the Hatay and Syria), and the malarial wetlands of Mesopotamia. In the 1880s German engineers and money men had rediscovered the dream of a Baghdad railway, just as von der Goltz was helping revive the Ottoman army. After Georg von Siemens of Deutsche Bank gave Sultan Abdülhamid II an emergency loan of 30 million marks in 1888, the Anatolian Railway Company was formed on March 4, 1889.²⁹ Within three years the Istanbul-İzmit line had been extended to Ankara, which greatly accelerated the Turkish mobilization in 1897.³⁰

The key to Bismarck's Baghdad railway policy, like the von der Goltz military mission, was inconspicuousness. If we trace the early history of the Baghdad railway concessions, it is remarkable how little attention they received — outside St. Petersburg of course, where Russians viewed them with predictable foreboding.³¹ The completion of the İzmit-Ankara extension between 1889 and 1892, although entirely the work of the German-dominated Anatolian Railway Company, was in fact largely financed by bond issues in the City of London (although the Germans did later buy out the British shares), which helped camouflage German intentions.³² This was classic Bismarckian policy: quiet, gradualist, inexpensive, and in no way alarming to the other powers. So unconcerned were the Russians about German investments in the Ottoman Empire that St. Petersburg itself requested renewal of the Reinsurance Treaty in 1890.

Of course, Bismarck's Byzantine pact was not renewed that summer — Kaiser Wilhelm II had finally pushed the chancellor out of office in March 1890, and the new chancellor, Leo Caprivi, found its terms not so much offensive as beyond his capacity to understand. The speed with which German foreign policy was transformed after this watershed event has sometimes been exaggerated: the Franco-Russian alliance targeting Wilhelmine Germany with Bismarck's nightmare of a two-front war was not fully ratified until 1894 — and even then Berlin remained on fairly good terms with London, if not so much with St. Petersburg. When it came to Turkey, nothing of substance changed on the surface: the von der Goltz mission remained in place, and the Anatolian Railway Company continued work on the İzmit-Ankara extension.

In terms of *style*, however, a tremendous revolution had taken place in Germany's posture toward the Ottoman Empire. In November 1889 the new emperor Wilhelm II (who, at thirty, was then Bismarck's junior by fifty-four years) — over the stout objections of the iron chancellor — had made a grand state visit to Constantinople, falling in love with the city and Ottoman Turkey more generally. Taken into confidence by Sultan Abdülhamid II, who cleverly told the impressionable young Kaiser that "his visit

would make the other powers nervous," Wilhelm II began imagining himself as the champion of beleaguered Turks against bullying Europeans.³³

Just nine years later the German emperor made an even more famous grand tour of Asiatic Turkey, where he memorably pledged himself to protect Turks — and Muslims — everywhere. Wilhelm declaimed that summer in Damascus with dramatic flourish: "May the Sultan and his 300 million Muslim subjects scattered across the earth, who venerate him as their Caliph, be assured that the German Kaiser will be their friend for all time."³⁴ Thus was born Hajji Wilhelm, as the Kaiser was sometimes called due to his pose as global protector of Ottoman (and even Persian and Indian) Muslims against the hostile predations of the Christian colonial powers. Britain, France, and Russia all ruled over millions of Muslim subjects — the Raj alone counted nearly 100 million. Not surprisingly, diplomats of the powers soon to coalesce into the Triple Entente were thus greatly alarmed by the Kaiser's speech in Damascus. The Kaiser seemed to have substituted the gushing enthusiasms of a diplomatic amateur hour for Bismarck's posture of cool and calculated indifference toward the Ottoman Empire.³⁵

It was a new age in German diplomacy, and not only in the person of Wilhelm II. Succeeding the subtle Bismarck *filis* as state secretary in March 1890 was Adolf Marschall von Biberstein, who, in a sign of Germany's new foreign policy priorities, would be appointed ambassador to Constantinople in 1897 — a post he would hold for another fifteen years. Marschall, unlike Bismarck's man at the Porte (Radowitz), made no effort to hide his partiality for Turkey — or, more precisely, for Germany's primacy of position in Turkey: not for nothing did he become known as the "Giant of the Bosphorus." Marschall, backed by Kaiser Wilhelm II, made very clear his support for the sultan following the bloody Armenian uprisings of 1894–96, even as diplomats from the other powers were unanimous in condemning Abdülhamid II. In August 1896 the Kaiser even sent a signed photograph of himself in public celebration of the sultan's birthday, just as everyone else in Europe was condemning the Kaiser's friend as "the bloody Sultan" or "Abdul the Damned."³⁶ Meanwhile, whereas Radowitz and the two Bismarcks had ever so quietly signed off on German military missions and declared that the Anatolian Railway Company would receive no official support from Berlin, Marschall declared quite openly in 1899, on the eve of the fateful signing of the first Baghdad Railway Convention:

To extend the railway from Haydar-Pasha to Baghdad...to build this line with only German materials and for the purpose of bringing goods and people to [Asia] via the most direct path from the

heart of Germany...will bring closer the day when [Bismarck's] remark about the entire Orient not being worth the bones of a Pomeranian Grenadier will seem like a curious historical memory.³⁷

A more emphatic repudiation of Bismarckian Ottoman policy could scarcely be imagined.

A brief glance at the particulars of the Baghdad Railway Convention signed in December 1899 indicates just how serious the German commitment to the Ottoman Empire — and the Hamidian regime — now was. As early as June 1898 Abdülhamid, through his ambassador to Berlin, had demanded that the Germans share intelligence on revolutionary opponents of his regime and be ready to deport specifically named “agitators” from Germany on request. In the years following the awarding of the Baghdad concession in 1899, the Kaiser’s spies duly provided the Ottoman sultan with regular reports on the whereabouts and activities of his “Young Turk” opponents. In return, Abdülhamid had secretly agreed to give German prospectors working for the railway company generous exploration rights inside his domains, including copper and coal mining grants and broad excavation rights within twenty kilometers of the Baghdad line on either side. A secret Ottoman imperial *irade* (decree) dated November 15, 1899, further gave the Berlin Museum rights to keep artifacts that German miners and archaeologists might discover while excavating on Ottoman territory. The results were dramatic, as anyone who has visited the Museum Island in Berlin knows. Finally, the Baghdad Railway Convention of 1899, unlike the Anatolian Railway Company chartered a decade earlier in Bismarck’s last year in office, required a substantial and open-ended German financial commitment — beginning with a straight-up bribe of 200,000 Turkish pounds (then worth \$1 million, the contemporary equivalent of over \$100 million) deposited directly into the Ottoman state treasury by Deutsche Bank. Poor old Bismarck (who had died the previous year) would have rolled over in his grave if he had learned of this.³⁸

With the one-two punch of the Kaiser’s Damascus speech of 1898 and the sweeping Baghdad Railway Convention of 1899, the die was essentially cast for the (still unofficial) German-Turkish alliance: the Kaiser and the sultan were now bound together against the rival European powers, for better and for worse. So strong was the relationship that not even the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and the fall of Abdülhamid after the Otuzbir Mart Vakası (the counterrevolution of April 13, 1909, which led to the sultan’s deposition following a Committee of Union and Progress [CUP] counter coup) could dent it. In ironic testimony to the undimin-

ished power of the colossal new German Embassy atop the hill of Taksim in the era of Marschall, the Giant of the Bosphorus, Abdülhamid's secret police chief İzzet Paşa would seek refuge there from the mob during the Young Turk Revolution of July 1908, even as the Speaker of the CUP-dominated parliament, Ahmed Rıza, sought refuge in a German Baghdad Railway Company building during the Otuzbir Mart Vakası.³⁹ Another sign of the enduring strength of the relationship between Berlin and Constantinople was the playing out of the controversial "Armenian reform" campaign of 1913–14: Marschall's successor, Hans von Wangenheim, kept the Ottoman grand vizier, Said Halim Paşa, informed on everything the Russians were up to. Although the Germans ultimately agreed to go along as part of a general compromise to cool tensions over the "Liman von Sanders affair" (which broke in November–December 1913), Wangenheim left the grand vizier in no doubt that Russia was behind the Armenian reform campaign and that Germany was going along only to keep the peace. Viewing the campaign as essentially a Russian plot, Wangenheim pointedly demanded that Russia's ambassador, Mikhail Girs, personally insist that the Turks agree to controversial points, such as the appointment of European inspectors in the six eastern "Armenian" provinces, so that the Germans themselves could escape Turkish opprobrium. As Girs complained to Wangenheim on October 17, 1913, "it would be dangerous if we alone had to make this demand, as then all of Turkey's exasperation would fall exclusively on us [Russians]."⁴⁰ Due to German insistence, the final terms of the reform agreement ratified in February 1914 did not even mention "Armenians" or "Armenian provinces," as both the Russians and Armenian activists pointedly complained.⁴¹ On this as on nearly every important issue facing the Ottoman empire, Germany remained much closer to the Porte than the other powers, as borne out by the signing of the Turco-German wartime alliance on August 2, 1914 (after Vienna, London, and Paris had all turned down Turkish alliance offers).⁴²

The romance between Wilhelm II and Ottoman Turkey is oddly appealing, even allowing for the hiccup in 1908–9 in which his friend Abdülhamid was replaced by the pseudo-constitutional regime of the Young Turks. The Kaiser's famous social awkwardness, born in part of an inferiority complex due to his withered left arm (a legacy of a difficult birth that his mother barely survived), lends a kind of pathos to his fitful and ultimately doomed efforts at visionary statesmanship. It is hard not to sympathize with the efforts of Hajji Wilhelm to champion Turkey and the Muslim world, even if his understanding of Islam was necessarily deficient. Compared to Bismarck's cynicism and gestures of outright

contempt toward Turkey and Turks, the Kaiser's earnest love affair with the Ottomans is far more attractive to modern sensibilities.

Whether the interests of Germany — and Turkey — were better served by the Islamophilia and Turcophilia of the Wilhelmine era than by Bismarck's cold *Realpolitik* is a very different question. Historians have long speculated about the prospects for European war and diplomacy had Bismarck remained in office longer, with the obvious counterfactual being better relations with Russia (thus preventing the two-front war nightmare) and England (no "Krüger telegram," no German naval program, thus no Entente Cordiale in 1904 and no Anglo-Russian Convention in 1907 to crown the Franco-Russian alliance as a Triple Entente). Of course, the iron chancellor was a ripe old seventy-five when finally pushed from office in 1890 and lived only another eight years, with his ever-precarious health declining rapidly all the time. After a reign in power lasting nearly thirty years, it is hard to imagine that Bismarck's successors would have kept *all* of his policies: surely the Kaiser himself was not alone in wanting meaningful change. The von der Goltz mission and the Anatolian Railway Company had already pointed the way to a more pro-Turkish line in Berlin by the time Kaiser Wilhelm II pushed the chancellor out of office, Bismarck's Reinsurance Treaty of 1887 notwithstanding. It is hardly surprising that these policies took on new meaning in a post-Bismarck era, particularly after the Kaiser's own appointees (like Marschall at the Constantinople Embassy) began promoting them.

If it is clear that Bismarck's careful *Realpolitik* could not have endured unaltered, however, this does not mean that things needed to turn out the way they did, with Germany foolishly provoking its own encirclement — and helping push the Ottoman Empire into World War I. The key to any sensible foreign policy in a multipolar world, as Bismarck understood, is balance. Taking the enmity of France for granted, the goal of his diplomacy following German unification in 1871 was to postpone a Franco-Russian rapprochement for as long as possible, to reverse the legacy of the Crimean War. An essential corollary to this policy was to prevent a serious clash between Austria and Russia over dividing up the Ottoman inheritance in the Balkans, which might tip Europe into a general war that could only end badly for Germany, surrounded as it was by jealous neighbors. To stave off an Austrian-Russian clash, it was fine for Germany to help Turkey shore up its defenses against possible encroachment — but only so long as the policy did not tip over into outright partiality for Turkey against Russia, which would push St. Petersburg into the nightmare alliance with France. Had the Reinsurance Treaty been renewed in 1890,

had the Kaiser refrained from his ostentatious embrace of Islam (with its implied rebuke of the other European powers as Christian oppressors of Muslims), had Marschall not insisted that the Baghdad Railway Company be so exclusively German, the Franco-Russian alliance might never have come into being. Once it did, Germany had no way of escaping the dreaded pincers of a two-front war when the inevitable Ottoman or Balkan “accident” occurred. Bismarck may or may not have sincerely cared whether or not the Ottoman Empire survived long into the twentieth century, but his policies, by postponing Europe’s Armageddon, gave it a much better chance of enduring than did the Kaiser’s reckless romanticism. Wilhelm’s repudiation of Bismarckian diplomacy led inexorably to the German tragedy of 1914–18 and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the wake of Germany’s defeat.

NOTES

1. The original bon mot was uttered before the Reichstag on December 5, 1876. It has been misquoted ever since. For a discussion, see Margaret Lavinia Anderson, “‘Down in Turkey, Far Away’: Human Rights, the Armenian Massacres, and Orientalism in Wilhelmine Germany,” 111.
2. Cited in Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for World Power*, 196 n.
3. On Russian reactions to the Berlin Treaty, see William C. Fuller, Jr., *Strategy and Power in Russia, 1600–1914*, 321–22.
4. Winifried Taffs, *Ambassador to Bismarck: Lord Odo Russell, First Baron Ampthill*, 130–31.
5. Otto Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany*, 2: 422.
6. Cited in Taffs, *Ambassador to Bismarck*, 195.
7. “Diktat des Reichskanzlers Fürsten von Bismarck, z. Z., in Varzin,” in *Die grosse Politik der Europäischen Kabinette*, 2:64 (document no. 246).
8. Cited in Taffs, *Ambassador to Bismarck*, 119.
9. “Diktat des Reichskanzlers Fürsten von Bismarck, z. Z., in Varzin,” in *Die grosse Politik der Europäischen Kabinette*, 2:88 (document no. 256).
10. As rendered by Bismarck’s son Herbert, in Horst Kohl, ed., *Anhang zu den Gedanken und Erinnerungen von Otto Fürst von Bismarck*, 2:497.
11. Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany*, 2:428–49.
12. *Ibid.*, 2:419.
13. *Ibid.*, 2:436–37.
14. Cited in Taffs, *Ambassador to Bismarck*, 174.
15. Immanuel Geiss, ed., *Der Berliner Kongress 1878: Protokolle und Materialien*, xix–xx; on Bismarck’s drinking, see Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany*, 2:438.
16. Lord Salisbury to Mr. Cross, June 15, 1878, reproduced in Lady Gwendolen Cecil (his daughter), *Life of Robert, Marquis of Salisbury*, 2:282.

17. Cited in Geiss, *Der Berliner Kongress 1878*, xxiii. 68.
18. *Ibid.*, xxiii n. 70.
19. Cited in Jehuda L. Wallach, "Bismarck and the 'Eastern Question': A Re-Assessment," 27.
20. Paul Rohrbach, *Die Bagdadbahn*, 16.
21. Hajo Holborn, ed., *Aufzeichnungen und Erinnerungen aus dem Leben des Botschafters Joseph Maria von Radowitz*, 2:245.
22. Jonathan S. McMurray, *Distant Ties: Germany, the Ottoman Empire, and the Construction of the Baghdad Railway*, 26–27, 35 n. 51. For the gun placements, see Edward J. Erickson, *Defeat in Detail: The Ottoman Army in the Balkans, 1912–13*, 13–14.
23. The final version of the *Rückversicherungsvertrages* of June 1887, in the French original (including the full text of the "Protocole additionnel et très secret" concerning Russia intervention at the Straits) is reproduced in *Die grosse Politik der Europäischen Kabinette*, 5:253–55.
24. Cited in Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany*, 2:251.
25. Girs to Shuvalov, May 25, 1887, in *Die grosse Politik der Europäischen Kabinette*, 5:239–40 (document 1082). As originally proposed by Girs, the demand was for Russian freedom of action in Bulgaria, Eastern Rumelia, or Constantinople.
26. Serious Russian operational planning for an amphibious operation to seize Constantinople did not begin until 1895–96, when the "Armenian uprising crisis" seemed to threaten the rule of Abdülhamid II. Even eighteen years later Russia's foreign minister S. D. Sazonov recalled in his memoirs that a February 1914 conference of leading Russian politicians, generals, and naval officers had concluded that the Black Sea fleet still lacked sufficient amphibious carrying capacity to seize Constantinople by force. Sazonov, *Fateful Years, 1909–1916: The Reminiscences of Serge Sazonov, Russia's Minister for Foreign Affairs—1914*, 126–27.
27. Erickson, *Defeat in Detail*, 11–14.
28. *Ibid.*, 15.
29. Herbert Feis, *Europe: The World's Banker, 1870–1914*, 343–44.
30. McMurray, *Distant Ties*, 29. On the early years of the Baghdad railway, see also Sean McMeekin, *The Berlin-Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany's Bid for World Power, 1898–1918*, chapter 2.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Maybelle Kennedy Chapman, *Great Britain and the Baghdad Railway, 1888–1914*, 24.
33. McMeekin, *The Berlin-Baghdad Express*, 8–9.
34. Wilhelm II, "Tischrede in Damaskus (8. November 1898)," 81.
35. Rumors also spread widely through Arab street bazaars following the Damascus speech that the Kaiser had converted to Islam. While German consuls in the area never actually claimed this publicly, they also made no effort to refute these rumors. See McMeekin, *The Berlin-Baghdad Express*, chapter 1.
36. Michael Balfour, *The Kaiser and His Times*, 190.
37. Cited in Erich Lindow, *Freiherr Marschall von Bieberstein als Botschafter in Konstantinopel, 1897–1912*, 48.
38. For these details, see McMeekin, *The Berlin-Baghdad Express*, chapter 2 ("Berlin to Baghdad").

39. *Ibid.*, 72.
40. Girs to Alexander Izvolskii, Russian ambassador to Paris, copied to S. D. Sazonov, October 4/17, 1913, in Arkhiv Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Imperii (AVPRI), fond 172, op. 514-2, del. 633, list 19.
41. Richard G. Hovannisian, "The Armenian Question in the Ottoman Empire, 1876 to 1914," 2:237.
42. M. Şükrü Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 173–74.