

**SCTMG 2020****International Scientific Conference «Social and Cultural Transformations in the  
Context of Modern Globalism»****BOSPHORUS AND DARDANELLES IN RUSSIAN-BRITISH  
RELATIONSHIPS AT THE TURN OF 20TH CENTURY**

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***Abstract***

The paper discusses the role of the Black Sea Straits in the foreign policy of Russia and Great Britain in the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is shown that these countries solidly addressed the plans for expansion of the Straits. For Russia, along with a specifically comprehensible religious mission, such claims were laid based on “economic” motives for protecting foreign trade and the idea of ensuring the security of the Black Sea borders. For Great Britain, the Straits were not of fundamental interest, however, it was strongly against the dominance of such a strong power as Russia. In this situation, Russia, actually strove for compromise relations with Turkey. Transformations to take place in the foreign policy of Great Britain were eventually geared to alter international politics in this direction. Having abandoned the policy of “splendid isolation” in favor of a pan-European coalition policy, Britain set three main areas that would contribute to the defense of the Empire: build-up of the fleet, restructure of the army and new diplomatic combinations due to historical necessity. In this situation, the United Kingdom, secretly, in fact, but actively whetted Russia’s expansionist appetite towards the Straits. Although the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 did not prioritize the issue of the Black Sea Straits, it was of subordinate importance, its very formulation greatly speeded up the signing of the Convention. Ultimately, this course was completed in the First World War, during which Russia paid the highest price for the “ignis fatuus” of the Straits.

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**Keywords:** Straits, Russian-Ottoman relations, Russian-British relations, inter-imperialist contradictions.



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## **1. Introduction**

In the country's history, as in human life, there is a cherished goal to which it strives all its life through. In the history of the Russian Empire in late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, one of such desired goals was Constantinople and the Black Sea Straits. This desire was originally reinforced by the need to consolidate Russia in the Caucasus arising from the Caucasian War. It was caused by the endeavors to accelerate the economic growth of the empire in the post-reform period, especially in late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the transition to large-scale economic development of Ciscaucasia, primarily, to the development of commodity crop production in Don and Kuban regions. Given a specific idea of Russian foreign agenda that was distinguished by “exceptionally high costs and a focus on military tools, along with astonishingly neglected issues of costs and national economic benefits” (Turitsyn, 2013, p. 31), it was even more crucial to ensure reliable protection of the southern borders of the Empire. Finally, besides security concerns and a pronounced desire to gain a foothold on important Black Sea-Mediterranean trade routes, certain parties in Russia embraced the capture of the Black Sea Straits and Constantinople as a truly messianic religious mission.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The Straits question has long been one of the urgent problems of international politics, attracting the attention of leading world powers.

## **3. Research Questions**

The subject of the study is the analysis of the problem of the Black Sea Straits stated in the face of an increasing threat of the First World War.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The paper aims to study the features of foreign policies pursued by the leading world powers, primarily Russia and Great Britain, towards the problem of the Black Sea Straits in the late 19<sup>th</sup> - early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## **5. Research Methods**

The theoretical and methodological basis of the study encompasses traditional principles of objectivity, historicism, consistency, alternativeness, enabling to address processes and phenomena of the past in all their ambiguity and incoherence. In the framework of modernization theory, the authors investigate the acceleration of interstate contradictions, which ultimately gave rise to the First World War. The source base of the paper is made up of the documents of some central archives of the Russian Federation, periodicals, publications of pre-revolutionary, Soviet, modern Russian and foreign historians.

## 6. Findings

Following the Berlin Congress of 1878, Russia's interests were most flatly stated in a frequently expressed desire to "destroy the national-state life of Turkey and erase it from the political and geographical map. We need the heart of Turkey – Constantinople and Anatolia, while its body is required for our natural allies and friends – the Slavs, Greeks, Albanians and Arabs".

In addition to the religious mission viewed in a specific way, "economic" motives were laid behind such claims. The Black Sea Straits owned by the Ottoman Empire were the only passage to the open sea for the South of Russia that was entering the period of intensive development. According to some analysts: "For Russia, the sea is not a means, it is the goal .... Our task is to pave military-political and economic ways towards the seas. Our mission is to completely seize access to the ocean" (Arktur, 1910, p. 47).

Such bold and far-reaching Russian claims were facing a very cautious attitude not only from Turkey, but also from a number of world powers. It was obvious, in particular, that Russia and Great Britain looked at the Straits question from the opposite perspective. With this in mind, it seems important and challenging to address the Straits question within a broad international scope embracing the reaction of these countries to the crises that shook the Ottoman Empire in the 19th – early 20th centuries.

Until late 19th century, Great Britain showed little interest in the Straits. However, it was strongly opposed to the domination of such a powerful country as Russia. The most favorable decision for London was the division of the Ottoman Empire and the neutralization of Constantinople and both banks of the Straits. As early as late 1870s, Britain somehow succeeded in this direction. Taking advantage of the defeat of Turkey in the Russian-Turkish war, England took over the island of Cyprus, and the British squadron was present in the Sea of Marmara throughout the whole of 1878. British warships could freely enter the Black Sea and threaten the unprotected southern coast of Russia. "Having yielded to the threats of England, Russia buried the vital issue for eternal times," Goryainov (1907, p. 57), a pre-revolutionary researcher, came to a disappointing conclusion.

In general, after the Congress of Berlin, the Straits still remained a bargaining chip in the Great Game between the European powers. Meanwhile, Russia, having failed to take over the Black Sea Straits and lost influence in the Middle East, shifted its expansionist aspirations to Central Asia, towards the borders of Afghanistan. The advance of the Russian Empire deep into Central Asia was caused, on the one hand, by the need to control the nomadic tribes and rulers of Muslim Khanates, and, on the other hand, by the growth and protection of Russian trade. However, according to, Lieven (2006): "As for the real reasons for the conquest of Central Asia, geopolitics prevailed here rather than trade" (p. 32).

Nevertheless, the Straits question was relevant for Russia, which objectively exacerbated some confrontation in its relations with Great Britain. Exploring the centuries-old rivalry of two great empires, the British historian Hopkirk (2004) called Constantinople the "far corner" in the Great Game of Russia and Great Britain. Each time during the aggravation of the "Eastern Question", the Straits acquired strategic importance. England could inflict the main blow to Russia by navigating its ships through the Straits and capturing the Bosphorus in order to take control over the Black Sea, Asia Minor and the Caucasus. In turn, Russia threatened Britain to launch a campaign to India. "Russian Nightmare" was one of the main topics in British publications of late 19th century (Vambéry, 1885).

Undoubtedly, during the aggravation of Anglo-Russian relations, Afghanistan, India and the Black Sea Straits became the key points in inciting public outrage in both countries. In the 70s of the 20th century, the leader of the liberal party, W. Gladstone, considered the advance of Russia in Central Asia as a process caused by domestic political reasons rather than a desire to conquer India. However, the more Russia advanced into Central Asia, the less the British parties perceived “Russian campaign” as something impossible (Jenkins, 1997). Gladstone believed that Russia had good ground to exert a decisive influence on the East and lay claim to Constantinople and the Straits. The British conservatives expressed more restrained views on this matter. For example, R. Salisbury, during the Middle East crisis of 1895–1897, repeatedly proposed to halt down Anglo-Russian contradictions. In this regard, in mid-1898, Salisbury once again attempted to conclude an agreement with Russia on establishment of spheres of influence in the Ottoman Empire, Persia, and the Far East. On April 28, 1899, Nicholas II, bound by the Russian-French union, concluded a limited agreement with England, governing railway concessions in China (Popov, 1899).

Generally speaking, the Middle East policy of London and St. Petersburg at that time was implemented at three levels: 1) European, i.e. relations between the great powers, 2) Middle East, associated with the idea to weaken and consequently divide the Ottoman Empire and to implement reforms in Turkey, 3) direct contradictions between Turkey and its neighbors – the Balkan states.

Each new crisis in the Balkans, regardless of its outcome, led to the further destruction of Ottoman supremacy. With the emergence of new Balkan states, the international situation on the Balkan Peninsula became even more complicated.

The Straits question was one of the most significant on Russia’s foreign agenda. Evidently, from 1878 to 1897, Russia’s interests in the Middle East and the Balkans were a priority in the state’s foreign policy. It was clear that Russia worried that the British fleet would appear in the straits, and further in the Black Sea in the event of a new international crisis. “In fact, at least until 1880, the royal fleet posed an incomparably greater threat to Russian ports on the Black Sea than the Russian army to India,” Lieven (2006) noted in his book. In this situation, Russia sought a compromise relationship with Turkey. Given that England gradually occupied the African provinces of the Ottoman Empire, Porta invited Russia to conclude an alliance agreement similar to the Treaty of Unkiar Skelessi signed in 1833, but this did not happen due to doubts and distrust shown by both parties.

In September 1881, Alexander III decided to proceed with the construction of the Black Sea Fleet. It had to significantly surpass the Turkish navy and, in the event of warfare initiated by England, prevent its squadron from appearing in the Black Sea. In a letter to the Head of the General Staff, Nikolai Obruchev, Alexander III pointed out: “In my opinion, we should have one main goal – the occupation of Constantinople to establish ourselves once and for all in the Straits and to know that we will constantly hold the keys” (Alexander III, 1885).

The Russian military establishment also believed that it was necessary to capture the Bosphorus for the defense of the Black Sea (Rybachenok, 2004). The landing operation for the conquest of the Bosphorus could be carried out in the event of:

- a) military operations initiated by Turkey with a European power,
- b) internal crisis and decomposition of the Ottoman Empire,

c) peace agreement with Turkey and Europe.

However, to maintain hold of the Strait, Russia would have to occupy a considerable area, to build two first-class fortresses with an extensive defense land-sea system, capable of housing a military post of thousands to protect the coast from enemy landing.

In this context, Turkey and the European powers were totally against Russian military forces to appear near Constantinople. Ten years prior to the Middle East crisis of 1895–1897, one of the reports of a Russian military agent in Turkey rightly stated that “over time, the expedition to the Bosphorus more and more loses its main advantages. A surprise effect becomes more and more difficult and, I reckon, after 2 years it will be impossible in its original status”. In 1896, during the Middle East crisis, Britain offered Russia a disguised partition of Turkey (two years before the crisis in the Ottoman Empire, an authoritative British publication concluded that “Turkey cannot be considered a maritime power”). Salisbury invited the powers to introduce an international squadron into the Straits. Given a favorable situation, Aleksandr Nelidov, Councillor to the Russian embassy in Constantinople, submitted a memorandum on November 18 (30), 1896, in which he proposed to use the Turkish crisis for the Russian landing operation on the Bosphorus. This was to be followed by an international congress to decide the fate of the Ottoman Empire. As for the Black Sea Fleet, in January 1897 it got fully operational, while Vice Admiral Nikolai Kopytov put forward a plan for the Bosphorus expedition. Nevertheless, Kopytov doubted that there were forces enough for the expedition, and warned that in the event of the intervention of Britain or the Triple Alliance, it would come to an end with disaster. “In the event of warfare, defense will fall in the early days,” Marchenko (1898) argued in his research, “domination over the Bosphorus can be firmly secured for us provided that we take possession of both banks of the entire Strait with sufficient territory to build a large fortress that meets all the requirements of a modern technology” (p. 19).

European powers, according to the London Convention, could demand the right for all foreign warships to pass through the Bosphorus. “The free passage of all the fleets in the world would be a sinister and extremely dangerous event for Russia in the full sense, and we could protest against this solution in the most energetic way”.

In conditions of German predominance in Turkey, Great Britain did not consider status quo promotion in its European territories an imperative of its policy. Doubts about the viability of Turkey in the Balkans began to be voiced by British liberals in the late 19th century. Since then, British public and political figures began to pay great attention to the Balkan countries and the peoples inhabiting the peninsula. In Great Britain, they did not rule out the possibility to take over the region with reliance on the young Balkan states. However, Berlin found it necessary to maintain the integrity of the Ottoman Empire, since London and St. Petersburg would take the lion’s share in case Turkey was partitioned.

During the Middle East crisis, various plans for partitioning Turkey were elaborated. According to one of them, Constantinople and the Straits (including both sides of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles) were supposed to be recognized as a neutral zone under international control, whereas Armenia and Asia Minor including Smyrna and Scanderon Bay – to be recognized as Russian possessions. France would take over Syria and Palestine from the Amasia range including the Mediterranean littoral; Austria – Thessaloniki; Greece with Crete – Macedonia. It was proposed to do with Egypt the same as with the

straits. Except for this, everything – from the border of the state of the Congo to the shores of the Pacific Ocean and the Red Sea – should be recognized as British possessions. Tripoli and Tunisia would fall to Italy's share. "Only one character remained disadvantaged – the German emperor, but His Majesty, by the grace of God, already has enough to take care of" (Fortnightly, 1986, p. 51).

A hard balance of global Russian and English interests in the Straits once again makes it necessary to draw attention to a wider geopolitical background, in particular, to the British opinion about the Russian threat to India. The Panjdeh incident of 1885 between the Russian Empire and Afghan Empire was, in fact, a clash of British and Russian interests in Asia. During this diplomatic conflict, Britain attempted to form an alliance with Turkey. However, the League of the Three Emperors helped Russia protect the straits from the attack of British military warships. Russia, Germany and Austria considered the agreement international and accused England of violating European treaties. England, however, interpreted the issue of the Straits as a bilateral agreement between a power concerned and Turkey. The British sources reported how seriously England was preparing for a possible war with Russia, developing plans for the occupation of the Black Sea and the landing (Public Record Office). England's goal was awesome and practical, i.e. through the occupation of the Black Sea and the Straits to exchange them for Afghanistan. After a short war, Russia and England could come to a peace agreement. Russia would receive the Bosphorus, and new territories in Asia Minor, England – Afghanistan and South Persia.

Russian relations with Germany and Austria cracked during the Balkan crisis of 1887. Having lost significant influence in the Balkans and the Middle East, Russia concluded a series of agreements with France, which formed the basis of the Franco-Russian alliance (1891–1893) (Rybachenok, 1993). The resulting antagonism with France and Russia forced England to seek rapprochement with the powers of the Triple Alliance, with Germany. Anglo-German relations were traditionally friendly. Hence, by 1890, there came up a threat of an Anglo-German union undesirable for Russia and France, and the Triple Alliance could turn into Quadruple Alliance. Notably, at that time London and Berlin agreed on southwestern African affairs, with England giving Germany the island of Helgoland on the German Sea.

A further pace of developments indicated that from 1897 to 1905 the geopolitical interests of the Russian Empire were directed primarily to the Far East. In early 20th century, some new trends were outlined in the development of the existing framework of international relations. Europe was moving from monarchy diplomacy to coalition diplomacy. England was prompted to exit the "splendid isolation" by the need to defend its colonies, cement its positions in Central Asia, maintain naval dominance, and lead in trade. A balance of power and interest was at the heart of the outgoing British policy of "splendid isolation" put forward by Salisbury. This policy consisted in the use and incitement of differences and contradictions between major European powers (Erusalimsky, 1964). The alienation of England was somehow facilitated by the war that began in 1899 in South Africa for the conquest of the two Boer Republics: Transvaal and Orange Free State.

However, the situation in the world was changing rapidly. Over the past decades of the 19th century, German industrial production increased by 5 times, British – twice. However, German colonial possessions were significantly inferior to English, both in territory and population (11 times vs. 32 times). This bestirred Germany to act. In its turn, the British government did not hide from Berlin its indignation

at the intensification of its foreign policy expansion, especially the project of the Baghdad Railway. According to the German plan, the railway was to run into the shore of the Persian Gulf near Kuwait.

In 1901, Edward VII took British throne. He determined three cornerstones that would further the protection of the empire: build-up of the fleet, restructure of the army and new diplomatic combinations, due to historical necessity (Lee, 1921).

England's attitude towards Russia was precisely depicted in a note by Lamsdorf: "True to its system not to bind itself by any alliances, separated from us by the sea and nowhere in contact with our borders, England considers itself completely invulnerable from our side and openly acted against us on the same Balkan Peninsula hoping to inflict the most sensitive blows on this ground" (SARF).

Russia had put emphasis on Far Eastern policies since 1898, without losing sight of the Straits, though. For several years, by agreement with the Sultan, Russia had repeatedly navigated through the Straits warships built abroad for the Russian fleet.

In 1898-1905, the Straits question was in the shadow of the international struggle for the colonies. Thus, during the Boer War, Russia did not take advantage of the weakness of England and did not dare to occupy the Straits. The Note on the Straits compiled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said: "... the Russian Black Sea Fleet was primarily required for the needs of the Black Sea itself, and therefore any fragmentation of it could only adversely affect our military-political situation there".

## **7. Conclusion**

Russia's desire to possess the Black Sea straits, as well as Britain's willingness, on certain terms, to go for the partition of the Ottoman Empire, were important factors in international politics. Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Russia for a while concentrated its main attention on the Far East, the Black Sea and the Bosphorus expedition faded into the background for some time. The desired goal of General Obruchev – the conquest of the Bosphorus necessary for the blockage and defense of the Black Sea – seemed to become impossible. However, at its core, the issue remained relevant. Disregarding the probable feasibility of capturing the Straits, the main obstacle to this operation was Europe rather than Turkey. Without Europe's consent, Russia would not have taken this step either in the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century. Against this background, the threat of the blockade of the Dardanelles from the archipelago was then more dangerous than the invasion of the enemy fleet in the Black Sea. Accordingly, even the strictest neutrality did not guarantee the freedom of Russian trade through the straits in the event of a war with Turkey.

All in all, the Straits question always remained among the most important in Russian foreign policy. Therefore, when the First Russian Revolution and the defeat in the war with Japan greatly shook the international prestige of Russia, its foreign policy interests and expansionist aspirations again became connected with the Straits. Paradoxically, the claims of Russia in this were warmed precisely by Great Britain again. Although in the development of the English-Russian agreement of 1907 the Straits question was of subordinate importance, its very formulation significantly accelerated the conclusion of the agreement. The latter once again demonstrated to the countries of the East the true nature of the policies of the largest world empires, which is known to have received a logical conclusion in the First World War. Russia paid the highest price for the "ignis fatuus" of the Straits (Turitsyn, 2015).

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