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## THE ABORTED BRITISH SALONIKA EXPEDITION OF FEBRUARY 1915

The lack of Allied military successes, east or west, by the end of 1914 became the basis first of disappointment and then of controversy within the British government. Men in England were disheartened with the situation on the two major fronts, and the horrors of trench warfare were becoming increasingly evident. It was therefore logical that many should revert to expounding Britain's traditional policy of secondary operations, especially those which could make use of British seapower. In the last week of December three such schemes were addressed to Prime Minister Asquith. They came from Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty, David Lloyd George, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Colonel Maurice Hankey, the secretary to the War Council.

Churchill proposed a plan taken from the secret files of the Admiralty. Making use of her great navy, Britain was to seize the German island of Borkum, invade Schleswig-Holstein, take the Kiel Canal, win over neutral Denmark, and open the Baltic to allow Russian troops to be transported from Russia and landed ninety miles from Berlin.<sup>1</sup>

Hankey, on the other hand, proposed the employment of British naval and military power against Turkey rather than in the Baltic. He summed up his argument, »If Russia, contending herself with holding German forces on an entrenched line, could simultaneously combine with Servia and Roumania in an advance into

<sup>1</sup> M. Gilbert (ed.), *Winston S. Churchill: Companion*, Vol. III, London 1972, Pt. I, 343—45: Churchill memorandum, 29 December 1914.

Hungary, the complete downfall of Austria-Hungary could simultaneously be secured.<sup>2</sup>

The third proposal to reach the Prime Minister was that of Lloyd George on 1 January 1915. This memorandum was the genesis of the eventual Salonika expedition. His choice of an eastern alternative was a logical step for one who was horrified by the slaughter underway in the battlefield of France and Belgium. His choice of the port of Salonika in Greece, where the Axios / Vardar River flows from Serbia into the Aegean Sea, was an equally logical step. Through Salonika British troop could most easily reach Serbia and attack Austria. In addition, as Hankey had, Lloyd George felt that the establishment of a British presence in the Balkans would bring at least some of those states to join in the Allied cause, would ease pressure on Russia and would allow an offensive against Germany's weaker partner.<sup>3</sup>

As Asquith considered the three proposals, alarming and significant news arrived from both the Balkans and Russia. Telegrams from the British ministers in Serbia and Bulgaria predicted a renewed Austrian attack of the Serbs, this time with the aid of German troops. It was believed at Nish, the provisional Serbian capital, that a force of some 240,000 enemy troops was already massing on the Austrian frontier.<sup>4</sup> And from Petrograd the British Ambassador telegraphed on New Year's Day that the Turks were seriously threatening the Russian forces in the Caucasus who were urgently in need of reinforcements. He reported that the Grand Duke had asked if it would be possible for Lord Kitchener to arrange for a demonstration of some kind against the Turks elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

When Kitchener received the telegram from Petrograd on 2 January, his fear of a Russian collapse moved him to at least partially accept Hankey's proposed campaign against Turkey. He was not yet ready to divert British troops from the western front, however, nor was he willing to send untried divisions to a new theater. He therefore sent two letters to Churchill at the Admiralty. The first asked if there was any possibility of a naval action against Turkey that could prevent the Turks from sending more troops to the Caucasus.<sup>6</sup> The second stated Kitchener's own view that the only place that a demonstration might have an effect would be at the Dardanelles.<sup>7</sup>

Churchill responded by telegraphing to Vice-Admiral Carden, the commander of the Anglo-French squadrons in the eastern Me-

<sup>2</sup> P. R. O., Cab. 37/122/194: Hankey memorandum, 28 December 1914

<sup>3</sup> P. R. O., Cab. 34/1/2: Lloyd George memorandum, 1 January 1915.

<sup>4</sup> P. R. O., F. O. 371/1902 (88480/38540): Sophia (N<sup>o</sup> 221), 30 December 1914; and P. R. O., F. O. 371/2249 (1323/1323): Nish (N<sup>o</sup> 5), 4 January 1915.

<sup>5</sup> M. Gilbert, *Companion*, III, Pt. I, 359-60: Petrograd, 1 January 1915.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 360: Kitchener to Churchill, 2 January 1915.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 360-61: Kitchener to Churchill, 2 January 1915.

diterranean, asking, »Do you consider the forcing of the Dardanelles by ships alone a practicable operation?«<sup>8</sup>

Carden's reply arrived at the Admiralty on 5 January. He cautiously reported that the Dardanelles might be forced by extended operations with a large number of ships.<sup>9</sup> On the following day, therefore, Churchill again telegraphed Carden requesting a detailed plan for an all-naval demonstration at the Dardanelles.<sup>10</sup>

The War Council met on 7 January to consider the proposed campaigns for 1915. But as long as the members of the Council disagreed as to which course to pursue and Field-Marshal Sir John French, the Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force in France, opposed all far-off operations, it remained doubtful whether any of the alternative theatres would be accepted by the War Council.

Kitchener criticized a proposal by French which called for the employment of fifty battalions of Territorials in an advance on Zeebrugge in Belgium. The Secretary of State for War desired to keep the majority of the Territorials for home defense lest the New Armies or the Special Reserves be required for that purpose.<sup>11</sup>

Lloyd George sided with Kitchener in his opposition to the Zeebrugge scheme, but the Chancellor strongly disagreed with Kitchener's refusal to consider using the Territorials as an expeditionary force. Lloyd George later wrote in his *War Memoirs* that Kitchener had the old regular general's contempt for the quality of the Territorials adding, »This miscalculation had quite an important effect upon the course of the War during the first few months.«<sup>12</sup>

After continued discussion of the proposed Zeebrugge offensive, the Council finally agreed to reject the plan, »as the advantages would not be commensurate with the heavy losses involved.«<sup>13</sup> The meeting could then turn to the consideration of the three alternative proposals.

The War Council of 7 January, however, only dealt with Churchill's proposal for the seizure of an island off the German North Sea coast. After the briefest of discussions the Council agreed to the plan in principle, subject to the feasibility of the scheme when worked out in detail.<sup>14</sup> Consideration of the remaining proposals was left for the following day. Asquith recorded in his diary that evening, »There remain for discussion the larger question of theatres and objectives, in regard to the choice of which one must

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 367: Churchill to Carden, 3 January 1915.

<sup>9</sup> C. F. Aspinall-Oglander, *Military Operations: Gallipoli*, London 1936, I, 55: Carden to Churchill, 5 January 1915.

<sup>10</sup> Gilbert, *Companion*, III, Pt. I, 381: Churchill to Carden, 6 January 1915.

<sup>11</sup> P. R. O., Cab. 22/1/6: War Council minutes, 7 January 1915.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

always keep in view the changes of bringing in Italy, Roumania, and such minor but not negligible quantities as Greece and Bulgaria.«<sup>15</sup>

The Council of 8 January opened with Kitchener expressing his fear of a fresh German offensive in the west, but the meeting moved directly to the discussion of the proposed eastern operations. Lloyd George was the first to speak on this subject. His comments closely followed his memorandum of 1 January.<sup>16</sup>

Kitchener then read a letter from Sir John French which stated that an attack with Greece and Serbia via Salonika was the least objectionable of the alternative proposals. Kitchener followed, however, by giving the results of a preliminary examination by the War Office which gave preference to Hankey's proposal for an attack at the Dardanelles. Further consideration of proposed operations was left for the next meeting of the War Council.<sup>17</sup>

Kitchener notified French on the following day of the Council's decision against the Field-Marshal's Zeebrugge scheme. The Secretary of State for War added, however, that the War Council »came to the conclusion that, certainly for the present, the main theatre of operations for the British forces should be along side the French army, and that this should continue as long as France was liable to successful invasion and required armed supprot.«<sup>18</sup> But Kitchener went on to specify:<sup>19</sup>

It was thought that, after another failure by Germany to force the lines of defence held by the French Army and yours, the military situation in France and Flanders might conceivably develop into one of stalemate, in which it would be impossible for German force to break through into France, while at the same time the German defences would be impassible for offensive movements of the Allies without great loss of life and the expenditure of more ammuniton than could be provided. In these circumstances it was considered desirable to find some other theatre where such obstructions to advance would be less pronounced, and from where operations against the enemy might lead to more decisive results.

To many in England this condition of stalemate referred to by Kitchener was already obvious. The blind refusal of French and his fellow soldiers to recognize this salient fact, however, served to encourage weak-willed and vacillating politicians in their procrastination.

Sir John French arrived in London three days later to attend the War Council of 13 January. Because of the Field-Marshal's presence the first matter to be brought before the Council was a re-examination of his proposed Zeebrugge offensive which the Coun-

<sup>15</sup> H. H. Asquith, *Memories and Reflections, 1852—1927*, Boston 1932, II, 65; diary extract, 7 January 1915.

<sup>16</sup> P. R. O., Cab. 22/1/7: War Council minutes, 8 January 1915.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*; appendix, Kitchener to French, 9 January 1915.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*



cil of 7 January had ruled against. The meeting broke for lunch at two o'clock and resumed at four, when the Council continued with their discussion of the Zeebrugge scheme.<sup>20</sup>

Lloyd George stated that French's proposed venture would involve heavy losses without settling the war. He protested that such a secondary operation should not be discussed by itself. Rather, it should be viewed in light of its potential contribution towards the greater objective of defeating Germany. He agreed that Britain should give every possible assistance to General Joffre and the French army in the main theater, but he added that if Joffre failed to achieve success Britain should try some entirely new plan and should begin preparations immediately for such an eventuality.<sup>21</sup>

Kitchener affirmed that the War Office was prepared to carry out what French proposed and that all necessary arrangements should be made, but he argued that final decision should be postponed until February.<sup>22</sup>

Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary, agreed. He added, however, as Hankey recorded, »We ought to consider what we should do in the event of a complete stalemate. For this purpose we should study the possibilities of (a) co-operation with Serbia and (b) an attack on the Gallipoli Peninsula.«<sup>23</sup>

The Council then moved on to consider the proposed operations against Turkey and Austria. It was at this moment that Churchill broke the news that he had received from Admiral Carden on the previous day that, by systematic destruction of the Dardanelles fortifications, the navy could make its way to Constantinople without the aid of ground forces swung the War Council to accepting the venture. It was therefore concluded that the Admiralty should »prepare for a naval expedition in February to bombard and take the Gallipoli Peninsula, with Constantinople as its objective.«<sup>24</sup>

The discussion then turned to the operations against Austria proposed by Lloyd George. In response to questioning by the Chancellor, French stated that complete success against the Germans in the western theater was possible but not probable. He further stated that, if the German lines in France could not be broken, it would then be desirable to seek other theaters such as those against Austria. Churchill, however, again objected to the use of troops in southeastern Europe until he was satisfied that there was nothing British troops could do in the north. Lloyd George then repeated his earlier argument that steps should be taken, though not irrevocable ones, for a campaign in the Balkans. The

<sup>20</sup> P. R. O., Cab. 22/1/8: War Council minutes, 13 January 1915.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

Council agreed and concluded, »That if the position in the Western theatre becomes in the spring one of stalemate, British troops should be despatched to another theatre and objective, and that adequate investigation and preparation should be undertaken with that purpose, and that a Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence be appointed to deal with this aspect of the situation.«<sup>25</sup>

Lloyd George's proposed campaign in the Balkans appears to have gained a great deal of support in the week which followed. After a Cabinet meeting of 20 January, Asquith informed the King, »The position of Serbia in view of the imminent renewal of the Austrian attack with German co-operation was anxiously considered, the Cabinet being strongly of opinion that a collapse of Servian resistance would have a most damaging effect on the cause of the Allies.«<sup>26</sup> He went on to state that all had agreed on the importance of bringing in Greece and Romania, and that Lloyd George had argued strongly in favor of dispatching a British supporting force. In response to Lloyd George's remarks Kitchener had promised to examine the situation.<sup>27</sup>

Asquith wrote to Grey on the following day, »I think — & K[itchener] agrees — that we ought to give up all our sideshows . . . if we can give effective help to Serbia.«<sup>28</sup> He also asked the Foreign Secretary if it would be possible to send an urgent message to both Greece and Romania asking them to go to the aid of the Serbs.<sup>29</sup>

On 22 January the Prime Minister wrote a letter to Venetia Stanley, his friend and confidante, in which he dealt at length with the situation in the Balkans. He said that Lloyd George, Kitchener and Hankey had met with him earlier that day to discuss the matter, and that Hankey had calculated that it would take at least six weeks to get a force of 50,000 to 60,000 British troops to Salonika.<sup>30</sup>

On 22 January Alexandre Millerand, the French minister of war who had come to London to discuss the deployment of Britain's new armies, relayed to Kitchener Joffre's total disapproval of the Zeebrugge scheme proposed by French. For his part Kitchener replied by pressing the Salonika venture upon his French counterpart.<sup>31</sup>

That evening Asquith, Lloyd George, Grey, Churchill and Millerand dined together at Kitchener's house. The Prime Minister

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> P. R. O., Cab. 41/32/2: Asquith to the King, 21 January 1915.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> P. R. O., F. O. 800/100: Asquith to Grey, 21 January 1915.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> M. Gilbert, *Companion*, III, Pt. I, 438—39: Asquith to Venetia Stanley, 22 January 1915.

<sup>31</sup> R. V. Esher, *Journals and Letters of Reginald, Viscount Esher*, ed. by Oliver Viscount Esher, London 1938, III, 308—9: diary extract, 22 January 1915.

recorded in his diary later that night, »Of course I put to him [Millerand] strongly the Balkan situation and the irreparable disaster which could be involved in the crushing of Serbia.«<sup>32</sup> He also noted that after dinner Lloyd George and Grey had pressed the point. We should notice that this was the first mention of support for the Salonika expedition on the part of the Foreign Secretary.

Negotiations between London and the Greeks, meanwhile, were pressed forward. On 23 January the Foreign Office instructed Sir Fancis Eliot, the British Minister at Athens, to deliver a communication to Prime Minister Venizelos of Greece which began:<sup>33</sup>

In prospect of a serious attempt by Austria and Germany to defeat Serbia completely, it is of critical importance that everyone who can support Serbia should do so. If Greece comes out as an ally of Serbia and participates in the war, I know that both France and Russia will readily admit most important territorial compensations for Greece on the coast of Asia Minor, and if M. Venizelos wishes for a definite promise I believe there will be no difficulty in obtaining it.

The communication went on to state that Greek and Romanian participation would ensure the defeat of Austria and the realization of their own national aspirations. It concluded: »To ensure that this participation should be effective, it is most desirable to assure Bulgaria that if Serbian and Greek aspirations elsewhere are realised, she will get satisfactory concessions of territory in Macedonia, provided she participates against Turkey or at least preserves a not unfriendly neutrality.«<sup>34</sup>

Venizelos' official reply, dated 25 January, was given to Grey by the Greek representative at London on 27 January. The text specified the need to determine the attitudes of Bulgaria and Romania before Greece could intervene in the Allied cause. The reply alluded, however, to the effect which a small contingent of Entente troops would have on the possible fluctuations in the attitude of Bulgaria. The Greek representative said that if even 5,000 British troops were landed at Salonika it would assure that Bulgaria would not move.<sup>35</sup>

Elliot telegraphed from Athens on that same day that he had met with Venizelos that morning and discussed the allusion to possible cooperation of Allied troops with the Greek army. Elliot had suggested that with Entente troops it would not be necessary for Greece to await the entry of Romania into the war. Venizelos, however, disagreed. He stated that Greece would require an agreement with the Romanians, concluded by formal treaty, that if Greece went to the assistance of Serbia and were attacked by Bulgaria,

<sup>32</sup> H. H. Asquith, *Memories and Reflections*, II, 68—69: diary extract, 22 January 1915.

<sup>33</sup> P. R. O., F. O. 371/2242 (8487/214): To Athens (№ 24), 23 January 1915.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> P. R. O., F. O. 371/2242 (11221/214): To Athens (despatch № 9), 27 January 1915.



Romania would attack the latter. This was in addition to his requiring two British or French army corps to cooperate with the Greek army.<sup>36</sup>

When the War Council next met, at 11:30 A. M. on 28 January, discussion began with the need to better coordinate planning among the Entente Powers. The Council next moved on to discuss the Dardanelles operations. The morning meeting then closed after a discussion of the Baltic project with Churchill stating that, of the monitors needed to seize an island, six would be ready by May and fourteen by July.<sup>37</sup>

At four o'clock that afternoon there was a meeting of the subcommittee which had been called for in the conclusions of the War Council of 13 January to determine where troops might best be deployed in future. Kitchener chaired the meeting and opened by reading a staff examination which favored Salonika. After lengthy discussion it was agreed »to ask the Prime Minister to assemble an immediate meeting of the War Council for the purpose of discussing whether instructions should not be sent to Sir John French informing him that the Zeebrugge offensive operation was not to be undertaken, and that the reinforcements intended to enable him to undertake this operation would not be sent.«<sup>38</sup>

Asquith therefore called a meeting of the War Council for 6:30 that evening. Kitchener opened the meeting with a summary of the subcommittee's discussions of that afternoon. The Prime Minister asked how long it would take to transfer an army to Salonika and how soon useful operations could be undertaken in Serbia. Kitchener answered that the actual voyage would take two weeks, but that three weeks ought to be allowed from the day the decision was made. He further stated that operations in Serbia could begin in the middle of March, allowing some weeks for the army to move up from Salonika.<sup>39</sup>

Churchill, after further discussion of the Salonika plan, told the Council that the Admiralty had decided to push on with the naval attack at the Dardanelles. The first shot was to be fired in about two weeks.<sup>40</sup>

As the meeting drew to a close, the Council approved the sending of British troops to Salonika. But there remained the task of properly informing Greece, France and Field-Marshal French of their decision. The War Council therefore decided that Churchill should visit the Field-Marshal and Lloyd George should visit Paris

<sup>36</sup> P. R. O., F. O. 371/2242 (10474/214): Athens (№ 54), 27 January 1915.

<sup>37</sup> P. R. O., Cab. 22/1/9: War Council minutes, 28 January 1915, 11:30 AM.

<sup>38</sup> P. R. O., Cab. 22/1/10: War Council minutes, 28 January 1915, 4 P. M.

<sup>39</sup> P. R. O., Cab. 22/1/11: War Council minutes, 28 January 1915, 6:30 P. M.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

right away, while Grey would be left to contact Venizelos at the appropriate time.<sup>41</sup>

French was the first to be informed of the proposed expedition on 29 January. He considered the War Council's decision and on the following morning told Churchill that he absolutely opposed it. Churchill, unwilling to accept defeat, proposed a compromise. As French recorded on 30 January, »We talked again before he left in the evening and he promised that in any case no change should be made in the programme of sending the troops on the dates they were to arrive, but he told me that when they were in this country I should have to be prepared for the possibility of the Government ordering the Divisions away...<sup>42</sup>

Lloyd George left for Paris on the morning of 1 February. Since Millerand's departure from London, nothing had been heard from Paris as to their reaction to the proposed campaign. Upon his return to London Lloyd George wrote to Grey, »When I first mentioned it to the [French] Minister of Finance I found that Millerand had never repeated to his colleagues that the suggestion of an expeditionary force to Salonika had been made to him while he was in England.«<sup>43</sup> His letter to Grey was printed in his *War Memoirs*. Hankey stated in his own work, *The Supreme Command, 1914—1918*, that this was the case.<sup>44</sup> Historians have accepted this view, yet the French sources disagree. Raymond Poincaré, the president of the republic, recorded in his diary on 26 January that Millerand had told the cabinet that day of the British plan to send a division to the aid of Serbia, and Aristide Briand, the minister of Justice, recorded the same.<sup>45</sup>

When Lloyd George first met with Poincaré on the morning of 3 February, he put forth the British plan to send troops to Salonika. Poincaré responded that the French government had earlier considered a military expedition of about 400,000 men, French and British, to Salonika as a diversion to lessen German pressure elsewhere. The objections of Joffre, however, had killed the proposal.<sup>46</sup>

The French government met on the following morning to discuss the British plan. They approved in principle that an army corps should be sent to Salonika for the purpose of assisting Serbia, and that it ought to be made up of one British and one French

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> G. French, *The Life of Field-Marshal Sir John French, First Earl of of Ypres*, London, 1931, 275—76; John French diary extract, 30 January 1915.

<sup>43</sup> House of Lords, Lloyd George papers, C/4/14/25; Lloyd George to Grey, 7 February 1915.

<sup>44</sup> M. Hankey, *The Supreme Command, 1914—1918*, London 1961, I, 277.

<sup>45</sup> R. Poincaré, *The Memoirs of Raymond Poincaré*, trans. by George Arthur, Garden City 1931, IV, 19—20; diary extract, 26 January 1915; and G. Suarez, *Briand, sa vie, son oeuvre avec son journal*, Paris 1939, III, 92; Briand diary extract, 26 January 1915.

<sup>46</sup> P. R. O., F. O. 800/172; Bertie papers, 3 February 1915.

division. It was agreed, however, that the French contingent could not be spared during the coming three weeks as a German attack on France was anticipated during that period. They further agreed that as long as Britain sent the promised four divisions to France, they had no objections to her dispatching an army corps to Salonika at once, though they would prefer that France be represented in the expeditionary force if Joffre could spare troops for that purpose.<sup>47</sup>

Lloyd George took the opportunity, on his way home from Paris, to visit the headquarters of Sir John French. In the very long letter which the Chancellor addressed to Grey upon his return to England, he stated that the Field-Marshal was at first hostile to the idea of an expeditionary force being sent to the Balkans, »not in principle, but on the ground that he could not spare the troops.«<sup>48</sup> French had asked to be invited to the next meeting of the War Council in order to discuss the project. Lloyd George urged in his letter to the Foreign Secretary that the Prime Minister invite French.<sup>49</sup>

French wrote to Kitchener after the meeting with Lloyd George that he did not agree with the proposed operation. He stated, »I find it very difficult to understand why the appearance of British and French soldiers in that part of the world should have so great an influence, and, unless something very decisive in that way will be gained by such a move, it appears to me to be a strategic mistake.«<sup>50</sup>

Back in Paris, meanwhile, Poincaré, noted momentous news in his diary on 7 February. He wrote, »Millerand has seen Joffre again and has told him of our decision with regard to an expedition to Servia; the Generalissimo has allowed himself to be won over.«<sup>51</sup>

Theophile Delcassé, the foreign minister of France, and Jules Cambon, the French ambassador, met with Grey, Asquith, Kitchener and Churchill in London on 8 February. It was agreed at their meeting that the situation in Serbia was urgent and that she should be promised two divisions, one French and one British, to be sent to Salonika as soon as possible.<sup>52</sup>

With the expedition to Salonika approved by the French, therefore, the War Council of 9 February was assembled for the sole purpose of discussing the Balkan operations. Grey opened the meeting with a report on his conversations with Delcassé. As a

<sup>47</sup> P. R. O., F. O. 800/172: Bertie Papers, 4 February 1915; and Poincaré, *Memoirs*, IV, 29—30: diary extract, 4 February 1915.

<sup>48</sup> House of Lords, Lloyd George papers, C/4/14/25: Lloyd George to Grey, 7 February 1915.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> G. Arthur, *The Life of Kitchener*, London 1920, III, 108 n.: French to Kitchener, 6 February 1915.

<sup>51</sup> R. Poincaré, *Memoirs*, IV, 31: diary extract, 7 February 1915.

<sup>52</sup> H. H. Asquith, *Memories and Reflections*, II, 72—73: diary extract, 8 February 1915.

result of their discussion, he said, a telegram had been sent to Petrograd asking if Russia would be willing to join in the expedition, contributing a third division. The Russian reply, he stated, had been that no infantry troops were available but that she would send a thousand Cossacks. Grey also reported Delcassé's full agreement that the British and French should each send a division to Salonika.<sup>53</sup>

Kitchener then said that the troops would be so placed as to prevent Bulgaria from attacking Greece once the Greeks had gone to the aid of Serbia. He still hoped to put the main burden of saving Serbia on Greece. He also still insisted on sending a regular division of British troops rather than the Territorials whom he continued to hold in low esteem. He therefore proposed that the Twenty-Ninth Division, the last remaining regular division in England, be sent to Salonika and, in its place, the North-Midland Division, the best of the Territorials, be sent to France.<sup>54</sup>

As the discussion drew to a close, Grey proposed to send a telegram to Sir Francis Elliot at Athens to be presented to the Greek government. He suggested the following:<sup>55</sup>

Every obligation of honour and interest makes it necessary that Greece should go to the assistance of Serbia. In order to enable them to do so effectively and to secure their communications, Great Britain, France, and Russia each propose to send a division to Salonica. Even if there is a delay in the despatch of the Russian contingent, the British and French divisions will be despatched immediately.

The proposed telegram would ask Greece to go to the aid of Serbia while the Entente Powers would merely guard Greek communications. Greece would also be asked to declare herself at once and prior to the dispatch of Allied troops. Churchill therefore argued that he thought it unlikely that the proposed terms would be sufficient to induce the Greeks to take part in the war. He was overruled, however. Grey telegraphed the proposed communication to Athens that evening.<sup>56</sup>

After the meeting Asquith wrote to Venetia Stanley, »The result is — that we try the Dardanelles bombardment next week, & with the French, & we hope & believe the Russians, make the Serbian *démarche* by or about the beginning of March . . .«<sup>57</sup>

The naval operations at the Dardanelles had been scheduled for 15 February. But a telegram from Admiral Carden, received on

<sup>53</sup> P. R. O., Cab. 22/1/12: War Council minutes, 9 February 1915.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*; and P. R. O., F. O. 371/2242 (15596/214): To Athens (№ 1), 9 February 1915.

<sup>57</sup> M. Gilbert, *Companion*, III, Pt. I, 499: Asquith to Venetia Stanley, 9 February 1915.

10 February, notified London that they were to be postponed. The necessary mine-sweepers were not ready.<sup>58</sup>

Equally important and disconcerting news arrived from Athens on the same day. Elliot telegraphed in response to Grey's communication, »I fear that if matter is put as an intention to send French and British troops to Salonica, it will give great offence.«<sup>59</sup> He referred the Foreign Secretary to his earlier telegram of 27 January in which he had stated, »While recognising moral effect upon Bulgaria of presence of the British and French troops, he [Venizelos] did not think that it would be a sufficient guarantee against Bulgarian attack on Greek flank, which would be disastrous.«<sup>60</sup> That same telegram had stated that Venizelos would only be satisfied by a formal treaty with Romania. That treaty would have to specify that if Greece went to the aid of Serbia and were attacked by Bulgaria, Romania would attack the latter. Elliot now suggested how the Greek prime minister, whom he knew so well, should be approached if Grey truly wanted to save the situation in the Balkans.<sup>61</sup>

I suggest that in the first instance we should ask permission to despatch into Serbia through Salonica without asking for active co-operation of the Greek army. I have no doubt that permission would be granted, and this might provoke declaration of war by Austria and Germany. Greek army, however, would be free to protect frontier against Bulgaria, and objections of General Staff would be thus removed. Active co-operation of Greece would depend on future developments, especially as regards Roumania.

My French colleague, who has not yet received instructions, concurs.

Churchill had argued along the same line at the War Council, but once again Grey ignored sound advice. Elliot was arguing that Greece should be allowed to follow the Allied lead rather than be told to take the lead herself. Greece would consent to the use of Salonika as a base for Allied assistance to Serbia. Allied assistance to Serbia, would, in turn, have a great effect on the attitudes of Romania and Bulgaria, as it would on the king and army of Greece. The permitted use of Salonika by the Allies, moreover, might well bring the Central Powers to declare war on Greece, thereby solving the matter in the Allies' favor without further ado. But Grey chose to close his mind to any scheme that failed to guarantee in advance the active participation of the Greek army within Serbia, and he would promise no more than protection of the Greek communications in return. He therefore telegraphed to Elliot on 11 February:<sup>62</sup>

<sup>58</sup> H. H. Asquith, *Memories and Reflections*, II, 72–73: diary extract, 10 February 1915.

<sup>59</sup> P. R. O., F. O. 371/2242 (15890/214): Athens (№ 1), 10 February 1915.

<sup>60</sup> P. R. O., F. O. 371/2242 (10474/214): Athens (№ 54), 27 January 1915.

<sup>61</sup> P. R. O., F. O. 371/1142 (15890/214): Athens (№ 1), 10 February 1915.

<sup>62</sup> P. R. O., F. O. 371/2242 (15890/214): To Athens (№ 2), 11 February 1915.



The intention, of course, is only to send troops with the consent of Greece, and you can explain this in making the communication. The proposal is made on the assumption that Greece, by every obligation of honour and interest, must send help to Serbia in a very short time. Unless Greece is prepared to do this, there can be no question of British and French troops being sent to operate alone without participation of Greece.

From what has been said both at Petrograd and by the Greek Minister here, it was distinctly understood that presence of Allies' troops at Salonica would be welcome to M. Venizelos, and would enable Greece to help Serbia.

Greek troops would then advance to Serbia, and Allies' troops would prevent Bulgarian aggression [sic] on railway or Greek frontier.

Matter is urgent, and you should submit it to M. Venizelos directly your French colleague is instructed, and let us have a reply.

Elliot could not have been but greatly distressed by the finality of Grey's reply. It is never easy to be an ambassador in disagreement with the Foreign Secretary, but Elliot had worked long and hard for a goal that seemed finally within grasp, a goal that was about to be thrown away by a superior who was refusing to listen to his representative's sound advice.

When Elliot's French colleague received his instructions on 15 February, the two western ministers presented Grey's communication of 9 February to Venizelos. As Elliot had predicted in his telegram of 10 February, and as Churchill had foreseen at the War Council of 9 February, the Greek prime minister rejected the terms of the communication as insufficient to insure the safety of his country.<sup>63</sup>

Elliot telegraphed to London that Venizelos had rejected the initiative »at once without referring to the King or the General Staff.« The prime minister had, Elliot stated, »again used language reported in my telegram No. 54 of 27th January, and said co-operation of Greece was out of the question unless Roumania joined, not only by attacking Austria in Transylvania, but in conjunction with the Greek forces.« Venizelos had told Elliot that he considered the presence of the British and French divisions to be entirely insufficient to protect the Greek flank from the Bulgarians, and he had protested that for Greece to join Serbia under conditions would be suicide.<sup>64</sup>

Elliot's blaming of Grey for this fiasco can be seen in a second telegram of that day to the Foreign Secretary. He stated that Venizelos had told the Serbian minister at Athens that he had informed the king of the Allied démarche and of his reply. The Serbian minister had followed by asking, Elliot reported, as to »what M. Venizelos would have said if we only asked for the free passage for French and British troops«, precisely the approach that Elliot had pressed on Grey. »His Excellency [Venizelos] replied,« Elliot stated, »That would have been a different matter' (see my telegram

<sup>63</sup> PP. R. O., F. O. 371/2242 (17907/214): Athens (N° 2), 15 February 1915.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

No. 1, Private and Secret, of 10th February).« In frustration Elliot concluded, »It might still be worth trying, but I am no longer sure of a favourable answer.«<sup>65</sup> Elliot had diplomatically said to his boss, »I told you so!«

Those historians who have criticized Grey on this matter have done so by condemning the communication as ill-timed as suggested by Hankey in *The Supreme Command*. Hankey stated that the naval bombardment of the Dardanelles forts was to begin on 15 February, the day of the Allied démarche at Athens, but that operations were delayed until 19 February. He wrote, »The French Minister in Athens appears to have received his instructions on the 15th, and on that day the message was presented, unaccompanied by the hoped-for news of the naval attack.« Hankey therefore concluded, »In the circumstances Venizelos absolutely declined to entertain the idea of Greek intervention without the collaboration of Roumania.«<sup>66</sup> But, as we have seen, neither at the War Council nor in the Foreign Office correspondence with Elliot had the two moves been timed to coincide. Elliot had been told by Grey on 9 February, and again on 11 February, to make the communication as soon as his French colleague was similarly instructed, which, presumably, could have been before 15 February. And the government had known since 10 February that the naval attack would not begin on 15 February. Indeed, Venizelos was well-aware of the coming Dardanelles operations. He could easily have delayed his answer, and delayed bringing the matter to King Constantine, until the bombardment had commenced. But he did not. He rejected the communication immediately and without consulting the king. Yet blame for the failure of the démarche must lie with Grey, not for his poor timing, but for his refusal to heed the sound advice of his subordinate at the scene.

The resulting consequence of the failure of the approach to Greece is well-summed up in the official military history of the Dardanelles campaign, which states, »So the Salonika project had to be dropped, and attention at last became focussed on the chances at the Dardanelles.«<sup>67</sup>

On the following day the War Council approved the sending of the Twenty-Ninth Division to the Dardanelles.<sup>68</sup> The cancellation of the Salonika expedition had left the Twenty-Ninth Division available for employment in conjunction with the naval attack at the Straits, an operation whose popularity from the start had been based on the assumption that it could be done by ships alone. Gone now, however, were the arguments that no troops could be diverted from the western front. As Churchill later wrote in *World*

<sup>65</sup> P. R. O., F. O. 371/2242 (17993/214): Athens (N° 3), 15 February 1915.

<sup>66</sup> M. Hankey, *Supreme Command*, I, 278—79.

<sup>67</sup> Aspinall-Oglander, *Military Operations: Gallipoli*, I, 66—67.

<sup>68</sup> P. R. O., Cab. 22/1/13: War Council minutes, 16 February 1915.

*Crisis*, »Under these influences in less than two months the naval attack, with its lack of certainty but with its limited costs and risks became subsidiary, and in its place there arose a military development of great magnitude.«<sup>69</sup>

Kitchener told the War Council of 19 February that he had changed his mind and that he wished to substitute the Australians and New Zealanders in Egypt for the Twenty-Ninth Division at the Dardanelles. His aversion to sending out the Twenty-Ninth caused the postponement of the plan until he finally relented on 10 March.<sup>70</sup>

But the die was cast. The approval of the Salonika expedition proved that British troops could be spared from the western front. Grey's handling of the *démarche* at Athens led to its failure. That failure forced the abandonment of the proposed Salonika expedition. And the abandonment of the Salonika expedition left the Twenty-Ninth Division for use in conjunction with the naval attack at the Dardanelles. One failure was to lead to yet another and far more costly failure. The result was the ill-fated Gallipoli expedition, an operation that proved to be one of the greatest fiascoes in the history of British arms.

#### НЕУСПЕЛА БРИТАНСКА ЕКСПЕДИЦИЈА У СОЛУН ФЕБРУАРА 1915. ГОДИНЕ

У овом раду аутор анализира еволуцију британског става према упућивању својих трупа на балканско ратиште. Повод за то били су предлози два члана владе (Черчил, Лојд Џорџ) и секретара Ратног кабинета (Морис Хенки). Они су били подстакнути исходом аустроугарске неуспеле офанзиве против Србије и настојањем да приволе неутралну Грчку да уђе у рат на страни Савезника. До тада су предлози за упућивање британских трупа наилазили на одбијање британских војних кругова (Киченер, Френч) да издвоје трупе за балканско ратиште. У фебруару 1915. године они су пристали да се на Балкан упути једна британска дивизија. То је отворило пут за упућивање британских јединица у Солун, у октобру 1915. године.

<sup>69</sup> W. S. Churchill, *The World Crisis*, New York 1931, p. 364.

<sup>70</sup> P. R. O., Cab. 22/1/14—18: War Council minutes, 19, 24 and 29 February, 3 and 10 March.

