CHAPTER XI

The Turkish factor

In 1914 relations between Istanbul and Berlin had been cordial for decades. German officers had acted as instructors in the Turkish army since 1883. They had assumed this role after France, defeated in the Franco-German War of 1870-1871, had been unable to honour a request from Istanbul to resume the training its army officers had provided up to 1870. Ties were strengthened even more after Germany embarked on her Weltpolitik in 1897. The Ottoman Empire became one of its targets, one of the places on the globe where the German Empire stepped up competition with the other powers, in particular with Great Britain.

Kaiser Wilhelm II did his bit to foster good relationships and lure Turkey into the German sphere of influence. He visited Turkey twice, in 1889 and 1898. During the 1898 visit every effort was made to cement relations with the Sultan, his ministers, and senior officials (Palmer 1993:190). The Kaiser did his utmost to praise Islam. To show his appreciation of the past exploits of Islam he visited the grave of Saladin and commissioned a marble tomb to be built to hold the mortal remains of this legendary hero of the Crusades. Wilhelm’s visit paid off. He was called the ‘Protector of Turkey’, and was hailed as the ‘personal and political friend of His Majesty Abdulhamid’.1 Wilhelm II not only presented Turkey with a marvellous new tomb of Saladin; he gave Istanbul a fountain. When it was unveiled in 1901 Germany sent an impressive military and naval delegation to the city. The Kaiser himself sent the Sultan a flattering letter. He complimented him on the way he upheld ‘the dignity of his throne and the prestige of Islam’.2 W.F.H. von Weckherlin, the Dutch Envoy, reported that the festivities bore the ‘character of a renewed big fraternization party’. The Envoy continued by reporting that on both sides the impression was given ‘that Turkey had only one single unselfish friend in the world’.3 It was

1 Van der Staal Piershil to De Beaufort, 23-10-1898, Von Weckherlin to De Beaufort, 23-12-1900, NA, BuZa, Politieke gezantschapsrapporten Istanbul.
2 PRO FO 800 143.
3 Von Weckherlin to De Beaufort, 28-1-1901, NA, BuZa, Politieke gezantschapsrapporten Istanbul.
not the only time that Von Weckherlin had drawn attention to the ‘more than hearty disposition of the Sultan towards the German Emperor’.

German industry, not least Krupp, profited. It appears the only intention not accomplished was Berlin’s request to have Turkey part with an uninhabited island in the Red Sea to serve as a German coaling station. It was only a minor setback. During Wilhelm’s tour the foundations were laid for a number of German projects which were inspired by a mixture of prospects or perhaps dreams of rich profits, feelings of national pride, and the pressure of international competition and mutual envy. They concerned the lines of communications which as objects of international rivalry were closely associated with the delineation of spheres of influence all over the world. The principal loser was Great Britain. There were two main German achievements. The first was the concession to build the Berlin to Baghdad Railway, linking the Mediterranean with Baghdad, and ultimately with the Persian Gulf, the ‘most important undertaking of German “Weltpolitik” of all’ (Gründer 1999:182). When completed, it would provide Germany with a direct railway line between Berlin and the Persian Gulf, threatening the British position in India and giving Germany an overland route to Asia as an alternative to British-controlled sea routes. The second was a telegraph cable line connecting Istanbul with Central Europe. There was also a third, minor German coup, which likewise undercut the British economic position. The Deutsche Levant Linie signed a contract with the Hamburg-Amerika Linie to start a regular service between Istanbul and New York in 1902. Four years later a shipping line between Germany and the Persian Gulf followed.

The consequence of these close relations had been the development of a strong pro-German and anti-British faction in the Turkish military and government. The presence of German military officers, described by the British Ambassador, Sir Gerald Lowther, as the backbone of German influence in Turkey, was instrumental in this. In the Turkish army officers had gained prominence who had been trained either in Turkey or in Germany by Germans. With a note of envy Lowther had to report back to London in 1909 that the Turkish government relied on the army, and that its officers ‘looked towards and admired the military efficiency of the German army’. In their campaign to win Turkish sympathy the Germans had made good use of a recently established paper in Istanbul, the Osmanischer Lloyd, to denigrate the British. The Osmanischer Lloyd let no opportunity slip to draw attention to articles in the British press critical of the new Turkish regime. Lowther described its contents as ‘malicious and fabricated innuendos about British designs and

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4 Von Weckherlin to Van Lijnden, 23-9-1901, NA, BuZa, Politieke gezantschapsrapporten Istanbul.
5 Lowther to Grey, 12-5-1909, PRO FO 800 79.