On 2 October 1923 the Allied occupation of Constantinople had come to an end. However, ratifying the Treaty of Lausanne proved an extremely slow process and it was 6 August 1924 before all instruments of ratification were deposited and the state of war with Turkey was formally terminated. This delay had not only annoyed the Turks and made the task of the British High Commission in dealing with them more difficult but also led to the postponement of decisions on three questions that could now be postponed no longer. First, what was to become of the dragomanate of the embassy? This was closely identified with the Old Turkey but local expertise remained as important as ever. Secondly, what was to be the status of Britain’s regular diplomatic mission in Turkey? Some thought it should resume its status as an embassy but others thought it should now be a mere legation. Thirdly, should the British mission—whatever its status—remain in Constantinople or follow the Nationalists to Ankara? There were good arguments on this question on both sides.

A Dragomanate By Any Other Name…

The dragomanate of the embassy at Constantinople had often been thought of as the flagship of the Levant Service but by the end of 1924 it seemed to have disappeared. The capitulations, the judicial provisions of which had given it so much of its work with the British colony, had been abolished by the Treaty of Lausanne, and three weeks after this entered into force in early August, the chief dragoman, Andrew Ryan, left the city for good. He had, he said later, wound up the “moribund Dragomanate”, which was “an office full of old documents, mostly useless in the new conditions”.¹ Shortly after this, knowing only too well that the title ‘dragoman’ was associated by the Turks with the humiliating regime of the capitulations, the Foreign Office decided

that it should be abolished altogether. So it was that Ryan claimed to be ‘the last of the dragomans’.

In practice, while many of their old chores had gone, the former dragomans could not be so easily got rid of; nor was it desired that they should be. Instead, these men, all Levant Service officers, were simply given local diplomatic rank and titles, and left to use their specialist skills and knowledge to get on with those essential tasks of the former dragomanate that remained: translating, interpreting, gathering intelligence, and so on. Until 1931 this de facto dragomanate saw only one change in personnel, and thereafter very few more until the outbreak of the next war. While its strength dropped from three to two in 1937, there was also great stability at the top because it had the same head throughout the 1930s: James Morgan, who had entered the Levant Service well before the First World War and was given the local rank of counsellor in 1930. As always, it was the dragomans in the embassy, whatever they were called, who provided the continuity and local expertise.

Changes which were to have a damaging impact on the ‘dragomanate’ were, however, soon to occur. To begin with, the pre-war system under which new entrants to the Levant Service were sent to Cambridge for two years of initial training, although it was resumed in truncated form immediately on the cessation of hostilities, did not survive for long. By the end of the 1920s it seems that those selected to study Turkish were sent more or less directly to the embassy in Ankara, which itself had to organize courses for them. There was also little incentive to engage in preparatory study of Turkish since—unlike Persian and Arabic—it