

4. AN UNPUBLISHED MEMORANDUM ON THE STRAITS QUESTION

BY BARON (LATER COUNT) VON AEHRENTHAL

WITH INTRODUCTION BY I. F. D. MORROW

(a) INTRODUCTION

BORN in the year in which the Treaty of Paris was signed (1856) Baron (later Count) von Aehrenthal seemed destined by Fate to be closely identified with the Eastern Question in its various aspects throughout his life. For many years he served in the Austrian diplomatic service at Bucarest and St Petersburg, and at the time of his appointment as Austro-Hungarian Minister for Foreign Affairs in 1906, he was serving as Ambassador at the Russian Court. His knowledge of Russian policy was indeed well-nigh unrivalled in the Austrian diplomatic service and, if it affected his outlook on European politics in general, it was certainly of the greatest value to him in what was to be the main preoccupation of his ministry—the relations between Austria and Russia in the Balkans. Aehrenthal had learnt from his study of Russian foreign policy that for Russia, as M. Serge Goriainow has truly written, the Eastern Question could be summed up in the words: “de quelle autorité dépendent les détroits du Bosphore et des Dardanelles? Qui en est le détenteur?”¹ And he had further learnt that it was the constant aim of Russian policy to make Russia “le détenteur” of the Straits. Hence he saw in the Straits Question a valuable object for barter as between Austria and Russia. The “friendly understanding between Austria and Russia in the Balkan Question,” mentioned in his Memorandum, might be rendered easier of attainment were Russia assured of Austrian support for her policy in the Straits Question. In this belief Aehrenthal met M. Isvolsky, the Russian Minister for Foreign Affairs, at Buchlau in Bohemia on 15th September, 1908. Making use of his knowledge Aehrenthal achieved some sort of bargain with him in which Austrian consent to the opening of the Straits to Russian ships of war was probably the offset to an Austrian annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. This bargain, and the subsequent Annexation, were the outstanding achievements in Aehrenthal's career, and a step upon the path that led Europe towards the catastrophe of 1914. In view of his use of the Straits Question at the Buchlau interview an early Memorandum upon that subject by Aehrenthal may not be without interest. The Memorandum was written in 1894, and probably in the early part of that year: the exact date on which it was written is missing from the original.

In the autumn of 1893 the visit of some Russian naval squadrons to Toulon had given rise to rumours that Russia intended to establish a permanent naval station in the Mediterranean. Rumours that very naturally caused anxiety to England and Italy, and caused Count Kalnoky, the Austro-Hungarian Minister for Foreign Affairs, to consider how Austria might be

¹ Serge Goriainow, *Le Bosphore et les Dardanelles*, p. 1. Paris, 1910.

affected in event of a war between England and Russia. In December of that year Kalnoky expressed to Count (later Prince) zu Eulenburg his anxiety lest the dormant Straits Question should again awake to trouble European statesmen. "The Dardanelles," he added, "lay outside the Austrian sphere of interest. On this account Austria would not feel herself called upon to fight the battle alone¹." And when Eulenburg, anticipating Aehrenthal's subsequent policy, suggested that the situation might be manipulated so as to form a starting-point for a peaceful understanding in the Balkan Question, Kalnoky replied with the remark: "I do not contemplate an understanding with Russia²." Germany had left the Vienna Cabinet under no illusions as to what her attitude would be—she would not seize the sword in such a cause³. Italy was hesitating, and England alone had clearly intimated what her policy would be. Yet even in England, and in the Cabinet itself, there were not wanting voices to ask: "Who cares in England for the supremacy in the Mediterranean?⁴" Lord Rosebery, who within a few weeks was to succeed Mr Gladstone in the Premiership, adopted a very determined attitude and told the Austro-Hungarian Ambassador in London that he was resolved to hold by the *status quo* and in doing so would not shrink from going to war. One notable qualification he did indeed make to his statement: if France joined Russia in arms then England could not fight the two countries single-handed unless the Triple Alliance held France in check⁵. It is no less notable, however, that at this time (7th February, 1894) Rosebery had not yet brought the matter before the Cabinet for discussion⁶.

Space forbids a fuller account of the history of an episode that for several months gave rise to much anxiety in the chancelleries of Europe. It was in these circumstances that Aehrenthal wrote the following Memorandum, which is given in translated form. (The italics and the footnotes are Aehrenthal's.)

(b) *MEMORANDUM ON THE STRAITS QUESTION*

BY BARON (LATER COUNT) VON AEHRENTHAL

Vienna Archives:

(Day and Month missing: 1894)

Acta Secreta. Liasse Türkei. XXVI.

The enquiry of Lord Rosebery as to permission being granted to Rumania to keep a flotilla at the mouth of the Danube (that is to say in the Black Sea) has reference to the deliberations of the English Cabinet for the event of the Straits Question again coming up for international consideration. On every occasion when the principle of the closure of the Straits, which is still in force, came up for discussion and a modification of it in the interests of Russia was

¹ *Die Grosse Politik der Europäischen Kabinette*, 1871-1914, Bd. IX. Nr. 2138. Eulenburg to Count von Capini. Munich, 20 Dec. 1893.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.* Nr. 2140. Baron von Marschall to Count Hatzfeldt, Berlin, 23 Dec. 1893.

⁴ *Vienna State Archives*: England. Count Deym to Kalnoky, 27 Dec. 1893. Sir Charles Russell, the Attorney-General, was the author of this remark.

⁵ *V.S.A.* England. Deym to Kalnoky, telegram. Secret 31 January 1894.

⁶ *V.S.A.* Deym to Kalnoky. 7 February 1894. Secret. Although Rosebery was careful to state that his statements were personal opinions only he did not hesitate to declare that the majority of the Cabinet were with him.

to be feared, the English Government of the day always held fast to the principle that if the warships of any one Power be admitted to the Straits these must also be opened to the warships of every other Power. At the London Conference of 1841 Lord Palmerston held fast to this principle. A similar attitude was adopted by Lord Salisbury at the Congress of Berlin in which he declared that if the acquisition of Batum had been maintained in such a manner as to have prejudiced the freedom of the Black Sea England would not have considered herself bound, as regards the other Powers, to renounce the right of entry into that sea¹. In a subsequent session (of the Congress) Lord Salisbury more precisely defined the English standpoint when he said: "je déclare de la part de l'Angleterre que les obligations de Sa Majesté Britannique concernant la clôture des détroits se bornent à un engagement envers le Sultan de respecter à cet égard les déterminations *indépendantes* de Sa Majesté, conformés à l'esprit des Traités existants²." England therefore renewed the earlier engagements regarding the Straits with the express reservation of "l'indépendance des déterminations du Sultan." This wording gave to England the widest freedom of interpretation of her engagements. Finally, in 1891, English policy took up the same standpoint that Lord Palmerston had in 1841 already taken up. This standpoint was taken up apropos of the arrangements between Turkey and Russia for the passage through the Straits of the ships of the *Russian* training fleet. At that time in the declaration handed in at Constantinople Lord Salisbury referred to the pertinent European treaties and declared anew that the opening of the Straits to the warships of one Power ipso facto opened them to those of the other Powers.

Similar language was held in Constantinople by the Gladstone-Rosebery Cabinet. In June, 1892, Sir Clare Ford protested against the XVII Article of the draft of a Russo-Turkish commercial treaty and declared that the Porte must remember that the Black Sea was not only a Russo-Turkish sea but that *Rumania* and *Bulgaria* were *States maritime* to it³. In October of that year Lord Rosebery, the head of the Foreign Office since August, 1892, made known through Sir Clare Ford, when the chances of a conclusion of the Russo-Turkish treaty appeared to be good, that England without hesitation would take for herself all rights regarding the Straits that might be granted to any other foreign Power⁴.

In the various phases of the Straits Question England has thus clearly and precisely shown what she would do were the principle of the closure of the Straits to be altered in the interests of *Russia*. In such an eventuality England would declare that the freedom of navigation *to* and *from* the Black Sea should be open to all navies. The putting into practice of this principle would naturally be a casus belli with Russia.

Even in an *amicable* raising and discussion of the issue in a conference England could scarcely abandon the standpoint taken up by the three statesmen Lords Palmerston, Salisbury and Rosebery (on two occasions). It is just possible that the public opinion of the country would declare itself peremptorily

¹ Protocol 14 of the Congress of Berlin, 1878.

² Protocol 18 of the Congress of Berlin, 1878.

³ *V.S.A. Turkey*. Despatch from Constantinople of 13 June, 1892. No. 32 E.

⁴ *V.S.A. Turkey*. Despatch from Constantinople of 1 October, 1892. No. 52 C.

in favour of a gradual relinquishment of England's position in the Mediterranean in order to avoid a great war with Russia. It is more probable that in a conference, or a discussion between the European Cabinets England will content herself with the *theoretical* recognition of the principle of the freedom of navigation to and from the Black Sea for all ships of war. In formulating the principle, however, *Rumania* from this time onwards must be taken into account because since 1878 she has been an independent State and, at least theoretically, cannot be denied the right of defending her harbours with ships of war. It is indeed in the interests of England that Rumania's right should not be contested; that Rumania should add to the numbers of her as yet insignificant flotilla and, as far as possible, place her single port K stendje (Constanta) in a defensible condition. It will be still more important for England to keep Russia away from the Bulgarian ports, Varna and Burgas, because otherwise as soon as the Principality becomes independent it will be encouraged to create a small fleet and to fortify these harbours. (It may be remarked in passing that at the instigation of Karath vetory Pasha the Berlin Congress expressly declared that as a tributary State Bulgaria did not possess the right to keep ships of war in the Black Sea.)

In further development of her design for the eventual right of all navies to freedom of entrance into the Black Sea England could presently logically support Rumania and also Bulgaria in every way as maritime States and endeavour to gain in their harbours an arsenal and a base for the fight against Russia.

Against the above, however, there must be off-set the unswerving aim of Russian policy—to restrict the flying of the flag of war in the Black Sea to those States possessing the right to fly it, *i.e.* Russia and Turkey. On account of the weakness of Turkey the object of this policy is really to turn the Black Sea into a mare clausum; that is to say, into a Russian lake. It can be assumed that Russia would submit only to such a revision of the international status quo as would correspond to its own interests and which would absolutely prohibit the entrance into the sea of foreign fleets while her own ships of war would be able to pass the Straits. Russia can never agree to a revision in the sense of the frequent English declarations; the price would be too high, and fraught with danger to her own territories in the most vulnerable points. In Russia's aspirations to a free passage of the Straits for her ships of war two considerations play a part: prestige and the practical consideration, *i.e.* the passage from one Russian naval base to another. This consideration, however, is not so important as to be cause for a great war. Russia might rather prefer temporarily to content herself with the (for her) protective status quo; and all the more as her prestige and position as a great Power in the East could be increased only by a simultaneous seizure and possession of Constantinople—a possession that is not to be snatched from the green table of a conference.

The Third Article of the secret Treaty of 18th June, 1881, shows the high value placed by Russia upon the closure of the Straits in conformity with international treaties. It is true, indeed, that thirteen years ago the Russian fleet in the Black Sea was virtually non-existent; but even to-day the closure of the Straits is able to form a *noli me tangere* of Russian policy—a policy which must be ready to make considerable sacrifices for this principle.

A peaceful initiation of the revision of the international agreement under discussion could then only come to pass, as far as Russia is concerned, if England were completely isolated. Such a situation, however, would involve the winning over of Austria-Hungary and Germany to the Russian point of view. A friendly understanding between Austria and Russia in the Balkan Question would be easier to secure than the abandonment of the principle whereby in reality only one, *i.e.* the Russian, flag of war is allowed to wave.

A no less important circumstance remains to be emphasized. England has not been content merely with declaring herself for the retention of the status quo in the Straits. As has been shown above, her statesmen have gone a step further and have on different occasions already declared what action England would take if the status quo were to be upset by Turkey or any other Power. Austria-Hungary, on the other hand, has merely emphasized that the observance of existing treaties is its guiding principle; it has never given any expression of opinion nor entered into any engagement upon it.

Obviously Lord Rosebery had taken notice of this fundamental difference in the positions occupied by the two sides when he declared himself ready under certain guarantees to take up alone the fight for Constantinople and the Straits.