

CHAPTER IX

GERMANY CLOSES THE DARDANELLES AND SO SEPARATES RUSSIA FROM HER ALLIES

On September 27th, Sir Louis Mallet, the British Ambassador, entered my office in a considerably disturbed state of mind. The Khedive of Egypt had just left me, and I began to talk to Sir Louis about Egyptian matters.

"Let's discuss that some other time," he said. "I have something far more important to tell you. They have closed the Dardanelles."

By "they" he meant, of course, not the Turkish Government, the only power which had the legal right to take this drastic step, but the actual ruling powers in Turkey, the Germans. Sir Louis had good reason for bringing me this piece of news, since this was an outrage against the United States as well as against the Allies. He asked me to go with him and make a joint protest. I suggested, however, that it would be better for us to act separately and I immediately started for the house of the Grand Vizier.

When I arrived a cabinet conference was in session, and, as I sat in the anteroom, I could hear several voices in excited discussion. Among them all I could distinctly distinguish the familiar tones of Talaat, Enver, Djavid, the Minister of Finance, and other members of the Government. It was quite plain, from all that I could overhear through the thin partitions, that these nominal rulers of Turkey were almost as exasperated the closing as were Sir Louis Mallet and myself.

The Grand Vizier came out in answer to my request. He presented a pitiable sight. He was, in title at least, the most important official of the Turkish Government, the mouthpiece of the Sultan himself, yet now he presented a picture of abject helplessness and fear. His face was blanched and he was trembling from head to foot. He was so overcome by his emotions that he could hardly speak; when I asked him whether the news was true that the Dardanelles had been closed, he finally stammered out that it was.

"You know this means war," I said, and I protested as strongly as I could in the name of the United States.

All the time that we were talking I could hear the loud tones of Talaat and his associates in the interior apartment. The Grand Vizier excused himself and went back into the room. He then sent out Djavid to discuss the matter with me.

"It's all a surprise to us," were Djavid's first words---this statement being a complete admission that the Cabinet had had nothing to do with it. I repeated that the United States would not submit to closing the Dardanelles; Turkey was at peace, the Sultan had no legal right to shut the strait to merchant ships except in case of war. I said that an American ship, laden with supplies and stores for the American Embassy, was outside at that moment waiting to come in. Djavid suggested that I have this vessel unload her cargo at Smyrna: the Turkish Government, he obligingly added, would pay the cost of transporting it overland to Constantinople. This proposal, of course, was a ridiculous evasion of the issue and I brushed it aside.

Djavid then said that the Cabinet proposed to investigate the matter; that, in fact, they were discussing it at that moment. He told me how it had happened. A Turkish torpedo boat had passed through the Dardanelles and attempted to enter the Aegean. The British warships stationed outside hailed the ship, examined it, and found that there were German sailors on board. The English Admiral at once ordered the vessel to go back; this, under the circumstances, he had a right to do. Weber Pasha, the German general who was then in charge of the fortifications, did not consult the Turks but immediately gave orders to close the strait. Wangenheim had already boasted to me, as I have said, that the Dardanelles could be closed in thirty minutes and the Germans now made good his words. Down went the mines and the nets; the lights in the lighthouses were extinguished; signals were put up, notifying all ships that there was "no thoroughfare" and the deed, the most high-handed which the Germans had yet committed, was done. And here I found these Turkish statesmen, who alone had authority over this indispensable strip of water, trembling and stammering with fear, running hither and yon like a lot of frightened rabbits, appalled at the enormity of the German act, yet apparently powerless to take any

decisive action. I certainly had a graphic picture of the extremities to which Teutonic bullying had reduced the present rulers of the Turkish Empire. And at the same moment before my mind rose the figure of the Sultan, whose signature was essential to close legally these waters, quietly dozing at his palace, entirely oblivious of the whole transaction.

Though Djavid informed me that the Cabinet might decide to reopen the Dardanelles, it did not do so. This great passageway has now remained closed for more than four years, from September 27, 1914. I saw, of course, precisely what this action signified. That month of September had been a disillusioning one for the Germans. The French had beaten back the invasion and had driven the German armies to entrenchments along the Aisne. The Russians were sweeping triumphantly through Galicia; already they had captured Lemberg and it seemed not improbable that they would soon cross the Carpathians into Austria-Hungary. In those days Pallavicini, the Austrian Ambassador, was a discouraged, lamentable figure. He confided to me his fears for the future, telling me that the German programme of a short, decisive war had clearly failed and that it was now quite evident that Germany could win, if she could win at all, which was exceedingly doubtful, only after a protracted struggle. I have described how Wangenheim, while preparing the Turkish army and navy for any eventualities, was simply holding Turkey in his hand, intending actively to use her forces only in case Germany failed to crush France and Russia in the first campaign. Now that that failure was manifest, Wangenheim was instructed to use the Turkish Empire as an active ally. Hitherto, this nation of 20,000,000 had been a passive partner, held back by Wangenheim until Germany had decided that it would be necessary to pay the price of letting her into the war as a real participant. The time had come when Germany needed the Turkish army, and the outward sign that the situation had changed was the closing of the Dardanelles. Thus Wangenheim had accomplished the task for which he had been working, and in this act had fittingly crowned his achievement of bringing in the *Goeben* and the *Breslau*. Few Americans realize, even to-day, what an overwhelming influence this act wielded upon future military operations. Yet the fact that the war has lasted for so many years is explained by this closing of the Dardanelles.

For this is the element in the situation that separated Russia from her allies, that, in less than a year, led to her defeat and collapse, which, in turn, was the reason why the Russian revolution became possible. The map discloses that this enormous land of Russia has just four ways of reaching the seas. One is by way of the Baltic, and this the German fleet had already closed. Another is Archangel, on the Arctic Ocean, a port which is frozen over several months in the year, and which connects with the heart of Russia only by a long, single-track railroad. Another is the Pacific port of Vladivostok, also ice bound for three months, which in connection with Russia only by the thin line of the Siberian railway, 5,000 miles long. The fourth passage was that of the Dardanelles; in fact, this was the only practicable one. This was the narrow gate through which the surplus products of 175,000,000 people reached Europe, and nine tenths of all Russian exports and imports had gone this way for years. By suddenly closing it, Germany destroyed Russia both as an economic and a military power. By shutting off the exports of Russian grain, she deprived Russia of the financial power essential to successful warfare. What was perhaps even more fatal, she prevented England and France from getting munitions to the Russian battle front in sufficient quantity to stem the German onslaught. As soon as the Dardanelles was closed, Russia had to fall back on Archangel and Vladivostok for such supplies as she could get from these ports. The cause of the military collapse of Russia in 1915 is now well known; the soldiers simply had no ammunition with which to fight. The first half of the year 1918 Germany spent in an unsuccessful attempt to drive a "wedge" between the French and English armies on the western front; to separate one ally from another and so obtain a position where she could attack each one separately. Yet the task of undoing the Franco-Russian treaty, and driving such a "wedge" between Russia and her western associates, proved to have been an easy one. It was simply a matter, as I have described, of controlling a corrupt and degenerate government, getting possession, while she was still at peace, of her main executives, her army, her navy, her resources, and then, at the proper moment, ignoring the nominal rulers and closing a little strip of water about twenty miles long and two or three wide! It did not cost a single human life or the firing of a single gun, yet, in a twinkling, Germany accomplished what probably three million men, opposed to a well-equipped Russian force, could not have brought to pass. It was one of the most dramatic military triumphs of the war, and it was all the work of German propaganda, German penetration, and German diplomacy.

In the days following this bottling up of Russia, the Bosphorus began to look like a harbour which has been suddenly stricken with the plague. Hundreds of ships arrived from Russia, Rumania, and Bulgaria, loaded with grain, lumber, and other products, only to discover that they could go no farther. There were not docks enough

to accommodate them, and they had to swing out into the stream, drop anchor, and await developments. The waters were a cluster of masts and smoke stacks, and the crowded vessels became so dense that a motor boat had difficulty in picking its way through the tangled forest. The Turks held out hopes that they might reopen the water way, and for this reason these vessels, constantly increasing in number, waited patiently for a month or so. Then one by one they turned around, pointed their noses toward the Black Sea, and lugubriously started for their home ports. In a few weeks the Bosphorus and adjoining waters had become a desolate waste. What for years had been one of the most animated shipping ports in the world, was ruffled only by an occasional launch, or a tiny Turkish caique, or now and then a little sailing vessel. And for an accurate idea of what this meant, from a military standpoint, we need only call to mind the Russian battle front in the next year. There the peasants were fighting German artillery with their unprotected bodies, having few rifles and few heavy guns, while mountains of useless ammunition were piling up in their distant Arctic and Pacific ports, with no railroads to take them to the field of action.