MATERIALS FOR THE STUDY OF THE WORK AND THOUGHT

OF ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE

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HOW THE EASTERN CRISIS AROSE

By A.J. Toynbee

Have M. Poincaré, Count Sforza, and Lord Curzon succeeded in averting the catastrophe to the brink of which we have been brought by our Government? At the moment of writing the situation looks less desperate than at any time during the past week. The decisive thing was Lord Curzon's success in inducing his colleagues in London to accept the French and Italian point of view. The Franco-Italian note, containing the vital assurances regarding the restoration to Turkey of Eastern Thrace, has thus been despatched, in the end, with the addition of Lord Curzon's signature. And since this constitutes (as a Franco-Italian note without the British Government's signature would not have done) an absolute guarantee to the Turks that Eastern Thrace will be restored to them, an attack on the neutral zone by the Turkish Army, with a view to getting at Thrace, need no longer be feared. This welcome fact is perhaps obscured by the thorough-going misrepresentation of Turkish aims and policy of which Mr. Lloyd George has been guilty. In speech and manifesto he has persistently represented the Turkish Nationalists as being on the verge of striking at the freedom of the Straits by force of arms, whereas, in fact, they have always consented to the freedom of the Straits in principle, and actually sent Fethi Bey, a member of their Cabinet, to London a month ago (just before their successful offensive against the Greeks) in order to make a practical proposal on the subject. Fethi Bey's offer consisted in the demilitarisation and neutralisation of both shores of both the Narrows (the Bosphorus as well as the Dardanelles) under League of Nations control, and this is precisely the solution that has now been proposed in the Joint Note sent by the Allies to Mustapha Kemal's Government. Considering that this latter note includes a satisfactory guarantee in regard to Eastern Thrace, its rejection is out of the question, for the Turks have been seeking the whole time not to destroy the freedom of the Straits, but to recover their sovereignty over Eastern Thrace, an entirely different and perfectly legitimate programme, which the British Government, till recently, have passed over in silence. It is not too much to say that our Government have deliberately confused

the two issues of Eastern Thrace and the Straits, and that if they had drawn us into war we should have been fighting not for the Dardanelles (which the Turks do not want to close), but about Adrianople (for which we certainly do not want to go to war with them). Now that the most acute danger is over and a real peace conference in sight, it is time to take stock of the Ministry which has placed the British people in such a dangerous and humiliating position, and which cannot be trusted to abstain from committing similar follies again.

Their responsibility goes back to the original landing of Greek troops at Smyrna in May, 1919. This landing was decreed by the "Big Three" of the moment (Lloyd George, Clemenceau, and Wilson, the Italians having temporarily withdrawn at that time from the Paris Peace Conference). It was carried out with Allied naval support. The Greeks committed atrocities within an hour or two of their disembarkation. And the result was the rise of a genuine and widespread movement of national defence among the Turks. Within a few months the whole of Turkey, except for the district then held by the Greeks round Smyrna and for the parts garrisoned by the Allies along the Straits, had come under the authority of Mustapha Kemal Pasha, the Nationalist leader, and the Allied military control, established all over Turkey after the Armistice, had ceased except at the few points where we were in military force. In consequence of this, the Turkish regular army, which we had reduced by that time to 19,000 men, steadily rose again, till it reached 200,000 in the summer of 1921. The resistance of this army to the Greek invaders made a new war, in which the scales became weighted more heavily against the Greeks as the Turkish army reorganised itself. That war has just been decided by the utter collapse of the Greeks, leaving the resurrected Turkish army master of the field.

During the three and a-half years that this war took to work itself out to a decision, all three Allied Governments (the French, the Italian, and our own) fell, or rather relapsed, into evil courses. Outwardly they all played the double part of Allies of the Greeks and of neutrals in the Graco-Turkish War. Privately, they proceeded to back one or other of the two parties, hoping to win, by gambling, the prizes of political influence and economic concessions in the East which they could not compete for honestly by their own exertions, because the French and Italian and British peoples were resolved not to put any more blood and treasure at their Governments' disposal for this kind of adventure.

The French and Italian Governments' support of Turkey and the British Government's support of Greece has not, indeed, gone to the length of "direct action" (notwithstanding the mutual recriminations of the inspired Press). Allied officers have not been leading the troops of their respective protégés (as I know from personal observation last year), and it will probably never be possible to prove that lorries used by the Greek army were supplied by the British Government, or that shells fired by the Turks came from Italy or France. The Governments have played this game for several centuries, and they know how to cover their tracks. At the same time, the backing was a reality, and the belief in their backers was the main encouragement to the exploited belligerents to carry on the war. In this immoral policy there has been nothing to choose between the three Governments. It can only be said that our Government, while no better than the other two in its conduct, was much worse in its reading of the facts. Having lost the gamble, however, our Government were not content with having proved themselves less clever than their Allies. Far from that, they at once embarked on a line of conduct which was a great deal more immoral than any action which either they or their French and Italian colleagues had taken up to that point – so immoral, in fact, that we should have found ourselves isolated from the rest of the world if our rulers had not shrunk back at the last moment from carrying us over the brink of war. The present crisis arose because the British Government misrepresented the situation to the nation at home and tried to play tricks on the Dominions, the Allies, and the Turks. They misrepresented the situation by suppressing facts: the fact that the freedom of the Straits had been accepted in principle in the Turkish National Pact (that is, as early as January, 1920); the fact that Fethi Bey had made a proposal for the freedom of the Straits in detail, which had satisfied our Allies (and has since been reproduced in our Joint Note), and that His Majesty's Government had refused to discuss the offer with him when he came to London to make it; the fact that the Turks did want to recover Eastern Thrace, and that (until last week-end) we had given them no assurance about this, while reinforcing our garrisons at the Straits which stood between the Turks and their Thracian objective.

Again, the Government played a trick on the Allies by publishing the manifesto of the 16th September, in which they announced a far-reaching scheme of separate British military action; they played a trick on the Dominions by summoning them by telegram to spring to

arms for the defence of the Straits without informing them (as far as we know) that the Turks were not challenging the freedom of the Straits, and that our Allies were satisfied that they had no intention of challenging it; they played a trick on the Turks by attributing to them an intention which he had the best reason to know that they did not entertain (namely, the intention of closing the Straits by force), and then, on this pretext, rushing up troops and warships to stand between them and their real objective in Eastern Thrace which all the time he studiously ignored. Mr. Lloyd George's conduct was the most direct provocation to war that one Government could give to another. One need only put oneself in Mustapha Kemal Pasha's position. At the moment, he had a local military superiority which gave him a chance of occupying Thrace at the price of forcing his way across the Straits *if he attacked at once*. He did not want to attack, because that would involve him in a violation of the Straits and a war with the British Empire. At the same time, he could not abandon his short opportunity of taking Thrace by force unless he were given a reasonable assurance of getting it by diplomacy.

Meanwhile, what was going on before his eyes? On the one hand he saw the British Government rushing up reinforcements to positions where they could not only hold the Straits but could deny him Thrace from the moment when they became superior to his own army. On the other hand, he saw M. Poincaré and Count Sforza at Paris using all their efforts to obtain from the British Government those guarantees about Thrace for which he was asking, and failing (till last week-end) to obtain them. In these circumstances, the Turks were bound to feel the utmost distrust of the British Government's instructions, the more so as that Government were calumniating them all the time. They could not afford to let slip their opportunity to strike. Nothing but the addition of Lord Curzon's signature to the Franco-Italian note has prevented them from doing so, and, had they struck, theirs would have been the stronger case and Mr. Lloyd George's the weaker one.

Mr. Lloyd George's statement to representatives of the Press was characteristic of his methods. The statement was delivered before the Prime Minister had capitulated to Lord Curzon's urgent messages from Paris (that happened later in the day). At the moment of delivery, therefore, he was presumably still undecided whether to play for peace or war, and so he played a card which might have led up to either. Examine that statement closely, and

you will find that it is like a knave of diamonds. You can turn it either way up, and it looks the right way up each time. If it is to lead to war, then there is plenty of abuse of the Turks to be found in it, plenty of jingo threats and false imputations. If it is to lead to peace, you can detect in it a hint of assurances about Thrace, and an outline of the very settlement of the Straits which was contemplated in Fethi Bey's proposal. It was a card which could either win the trick or lose it, as suited its producer's game.