

## The Russian Origins of the First World War

*By Sean McMeekin*

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As the centenary of the First World War will be commemorated this year, the debate on the causes of the war continues among scholars. With regards to the Ottoman Empire, the most recent study in English that benefited from Ottoman archives in addition to other sources has been produced by Mustafa Aksakal.<sup>1</sup> He challenged the traditional view that the Ottoman Empire went into the war due to the pro-German attitudes and adventurist character of the leading political figures. Rather, Aksakal showed it was because the empire was in a grave situation, expecting Russian hostilities and unable to obtain weapons and credits from elsewhere. Though following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the new regime published a huge collection of material (consisting of dispatches, official correspondence, memoranda, etc.) to condemn the “imperialist war” of the *ancien régime* and its secret diplomacy, Russian military archives were left virtually untouched. This was partly due to the language barrier with regards to Turkish and Russian material. In addition, Russian state archives were inaccessible to most researchers from abroad. However, this situation started to change with the end of the Cold War.

In this vein, Sean McMeekin’s *The Russian Origins of the First World War* aims to meet this challenge. The author has used published and unpublished Russian archival material while also benefiting from other states’ archives, memoirs and other sources. An especially important contribution to the current literature is the unpublished material from the Russian military archives. By relying on these sources, the author also tries to accomplish another important task of deconstructing and challenging the current understanding surrounding the war guilt issue. The view that considers Germany responsible for the war suggests that Germany used the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand on 28 July 1914 in Sarajevo as a pretext for its bid for world domination. The main defender of this argument was German scholar Fritz Fischer, who published his book *Germany’s Aims in the First World War* by relying on German archival material.<sup>2</sup> Even though Fischer’s views, which solely blamed German aggression, were later criticised to some degree, in the popular understanding since then it has become accepted that Germany was the only actor responsible for the war. As the war was seen an “automatic war” due to mobilisation plans, McMeekin also

challenges that point and proves that it was Russia who started mobilisation secretly first as early as 24 July 1914 (war was officially declared on 29 July).

McMeekin challenges this traditional view and tries to bring Russia's role to the fore in the mobilisation process and designs for partitioning the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires. In the author's view, war was welcomed by Russia and regarded as an opportunity to reach its objectives. It was supported by France financially in the pre-war era and improved its railway networks and industrial base and strengthened its armed forces. According to the author, the First World War could very easily be labelled "The War of the Ottoman Succession". The author utilizes the example of Russian memoranda to support his argument, one of which was prepared in 1895, on the seizure of Istanbul and the Turkish Straits through the landing of an amphibious force. Russia was encouraged by the Armenian mass protests that took place in 30 September 1895 in Istanbul which ended with armed violence. Following its defeat by Japan and the annihilation of an important part of its naval forces in 1905, Russia had for some time given up the idea. It was again revived following the 1908 Revolution and the schemes for modernising the Ottoman armed forces employed by the Committee of Union and Progress administration created great concern in Russia. The modernisation of the Ottoman military would make the task harder for Russia. In a Russian General

Staff memorandum of October 1910 it was stated that an amphibious force would land after an uprising of Christian minorities in Istanbul.

The abundance of archival material provides deep insights into the Russian decision-making processes and allows the reader to understand Russia's ambitious plans. On 21 February 1914, five months before the outbreak of war, there was a high-level special committee meeting in St. Petersburg that dealt with the plans to seize Istanbul. It was accepted that on M+5 (five days after mobilisation), a Russian force of 30,000-50,000 moving on ships from Odessa would land near Istanbul. However the setbacks in other fronts necessitated the postponement of this plan. It was Russia that demanded Britain not deliver the dreadnoughts built for the Ottoman Empire in the British shipyards (the *Sultan Osman* and *Reşadiye*) in order not to change the naval balance in the Black Sea. As the rest is well known, these ships were expropriated by Britain and then Germany sent *Goeben* and *Breslau*, which entered into Ottoman service and were renamed *Yavuz* and *Midilli*. Even while the Ottoman Empire was not at war in late September, Russia was intriguing with the British and French over its ambitions on the Straits and Istanbul.

As France faced a serious German offensive, it always had to come to terms with Russia as it was afraid that Russia would sign a separate peace treaty with Germany. The leverage Russia had over its

allies made them accept Russian territorial demands and the conduct of war because to the displeasure of France, Russia was more interested in beating Austrian forces rather than focusing on the German front in Eastern Prussia. The Gallipoli campaign of Britain and France was organized on Russia's demands and it was agreed that Russia would force the Bosphorus in coordination with the Allied landings in Gallipoli but the promised Russian contribution never came. Instead, Russia demanded that it should send a force only after its allies invaded Istanbul.

With regards to the Russian share in the tragedies of the Armenian population, the author uses Russian material to show that the events in Eastern Anatolia were organised by Russia and Armenian groups were armed secretly to serve its war aims. The most interesting point is that Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Sazonov, who always argued that the Armenians formed a majority in Eastern Anatolia before the war in order to force the Ottomans to grant autonomy to these provinces, changed his mind after the Russian forces invaded the region, and in his correspondence with Grand Duke Nikola (Supreme Commander in the Caucasus Front) instead opposed the idea of autonomy and argued that they did not constitute a majority in the region and

demanded strict control on their activities.

In conclusion, McMeekin's detailed study has illuminated many less well-known parts of the story and challenged the traditional myths that still survive both in the current scholarship and popular imagination. He showed that both Germany and Russia had imperial ambitions. He provides convincing arguments based on concrete proof such as published and unpublished archival material. His approach also allows the reader to see the discrepancy between the memoirs published by the statesmen in the post-war era with the purpose of defending their position and the official documents. His contribution will help in the emergence of a new and broader understanding of the events surrounding the war.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Mustafa Aksakal, *The Ottoman Road to War in 1914: The Ottoman Empire in the First World War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- 2 Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, New York, Norton, 1967.