

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 83

“The Flight of the *Goeben*”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

As the Great War began, the Ottoman Empire remained what it had been for the past seventy years: the “sick man” of Europe. Its staunchest defender had been Britain—Britain, which feared the consequences should the Turkish Sultan be driven out of Europe.

Well, that day had already come. The Ottomans were out of the Balkans, and the instability the British were always worried about had arrived, in the form of a Great War. With Britain’s allies France and Russia preoccupied with defending Serbia, no one, not even the British, gave much thought to the “sick man” anymore. He was ignored, no longer a factor in Europe’s balance of power.

That would prove to be a serious miscalculation.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 83. The Flight of the *Goeben*.

Last week, we saw the opening German offensive of the war, in Belgium. France and Russia are preparing their counteroffensives, which we will look at in weeks to come, but first, I’d like to move the spotlight to the dramatic events that were unfolding in the Mediterranean Sea.

The events of the two Balkan Wars had left the Ottoman Empire weakened and shamed. She was effectively no longer a European nation. Her new rulers, the Three Pashas, sought to modernize the Empire, as we have seen, and to modernize her military as well. Toward that end, a German military mission came to Constantinople in 1913 to assist in rebuilding the Ottoman Army. Germany and the Empire had been growing closer ever since that Berlin to Baghdad railway project got going. And remember, too, how Kaiser Wilhelm fancies himself a defender of Muslims.

The Ottoman Navy had been long neglected, to the point where it couldn’t even defend the Ottoman coasts against the Greek Navy, and another part of the modernization effort was to

bring the Navy into the twentieth century, beginning with an order for two modern dreadnought battleships to be built in Britain. I'll come back to those.

In the meantime, I'll mention that during the Balkan Wars, the German government decided that it was about time the world's second largest navy had a presence in the Mediterranean. And so the Navy created a Mediterranean Division, and assigned one of its newest battlecruisers, SMS *Goeben*, and a light cruiser, *Breslau*, to the new unit.

In November 1912, the Mediterranean Division arrived at Constantinople, where it remained until April 1913. With the First Balkan War dying down, the two ships made calls at Italian and Austrian ports. After the Second Balkan War, the two ships stopped off at Pola, the Austrian Navy's home base, where they underwent maintenance and received a new commander, Admiral Wilhelm Souchon, who was, as his name suggests, a German of French ancestry, born in Leipzig.

Germany had no naval base in the Mediterranean, but she had two allies who did: Italy and Austria. And so, Souchon and his two ships could call at ports in either of those countries for coaling and maintenance, so there was no problem remaining there even after the Balkan Wars had ended. Souchon and his two ships made courtesy stops at ports across the Mediterranean, exchanging greetings with the Italians and the Austrians as well as the Greeks and the Turks and the French. Only the British refused to welcome *Goeben* in their ports.

After a year and a half of service in the Mediterranean, *Goeben* was in need of some major maintenance. In particular, her boilers were leaking steam, meaning she was no longer reaching those amazing speeds that distinguished battlecruisers from their cousins, the dreadnoughts, and plans were made for *Goeben* to return to Kiel in Germany in the fall of 1914 for repairs, after her sister ship, *Moltke*, arrived in the Mediterranean to relieve her.

Of course, the Great War broke out shortly before the changeover was scheduled to take place. On the day of the assassination in Sarajevo, Souchon and the Mediterranean Division were docked at the Ottoman port of Haifa, in Palestine. Souchon saw the potential for war and immediately thought of his ailing boilers. He set course for Pola, and asked the German Admiralty to send the necessary engineers and parts to Pola by rail, so they could do the boiler work there.

So, through the month of July 1914, as the July Crisis was playing out, German Navy engineers were working double shifts at Pola to get *Goeben* shipshape and Bristol fashion. The work was not yet finished on July 28, when Austria declared war on Serbia. But the Imperial Admiralty was worried the Entente powers might try to neutralize the Austrian Navy by blockading the Adriatic Sea, which would also blockade *Goeben*. So Souchon took *Goeben* to sea at once, even though the repairs weren't finished and the ship was not fully coaled.

On August 1, *Goeben* reached the Italian port of Brindisi, which lies on the “heel” of Italy, at the entrance to the Adriatic. Souchon attempted to buy coal, but the Italian authorities, in spite of Italy’s status officially as an ally of Germany, refused to provide any coal, claiming the waters were too choppy for coaling operations.

But the German Navy had a network of purchasing agents and merchant ships around the world ready to secure coal stocks for German ships as needed. Souchon radioed ahead that he was headed for Messina, in Sicily, just opposite Italy’s “toe,” and requested that coal be collected for him and delivered there.

Goeben reached Messina on August 2, and *Breslau*, which had been off cruising on its own, rendezvoused with her along the way. August 3 was the day that Italy formally declared its neutrality in the war that was just then beginning, and so, under the international law of the time, *Goeben* could only stay in the port at Messina for 24 hours.

But I’m going to leave *Goeben* sitting in Messina harbor for a little while longer while we turn our attention to Constantinople, the capital of the Ottoman Empire. As I suggested at the top of the episode, the war with Italy and the wars in the Balkans had shredded what was left of the Empire’s reputation as a great power. The Ottomans can see vultures circling, and are feeling friendless and vulnerable. What they need is an ally.

The Ottomans attempted an alliance with Britain in 1911 and again in 1913, only to have the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, lecture them at length about how Britain doesn’t do alliances. Ententes, yes, of course, but alliances, no. The Ottoman representatives pointed out that Britain had an alliance with Japan, and suggested that their Empire was the Japan of the Near East, filling the same geopolitical niche in Near Eastern affairs that Japan did in East Asia. Sir Edward told them the British alliance with Japan was a special case, limited to certain issues specific to Asia, and told them that the British government wished them the best.

The Ottoman government reached out to France about an alliance, and even tried Russia. The problem, though, as everyone saw it, was that an alliance with the Ottoman Empire was a one-way street. Constantinople had nothing of value to offer these other nations, but it had the potential to quickly become a very needy and demanding alliance partner. So the French said no. The Russian foreign minister, Sergei Sazonov, when told the Turks were inquiring about an alliance, reportedly laughed out loud at the very idea.

By 1913 though, the Ottomans had done a deal with Germany for the Berlin to Baghdad railway line, and a German military mission was in Constantinople, helping to reform the Ottoman Army. To the Germans, this was nothing more than a business opportunity. An army that reorganized itself along German lines was an army likely to become a customer for arms and ammunition from Germany. But to Constantinople, rebuffed by these other powers and now desperate for an ally, it began to look like Germany might fill the bill.

Enver Pasha, the Ottoman Minister of War, formally proposed an alliance to Germany on July 22, 1914, the day before Austria presented its ultimatum to Serbia. Berlin at first reacted to the Ottoman proposal with the diplomatic equivalent of “let me think about it.”

The Austrian declaration of war on Serbia on July 28 broke that diplomatic logjam. With a general war in Europe now looking like a distinct possibility, and with it the prospect of Germany fighting a two-front war against France and Russia, suddenly an alliance with Constantinople—the city that sits on the chokepoint for Russian trade with the outside world—starts to make a whole lot of sense. The German Foreign Office cabled Constantinople that same day, July 28, accepting the Ottoman alliance proposal. An agreement was signed on August 1, in which Germany pledged to defend Ottoman territory in the event of an Entente attack, and the Ottomans in return pledged...to support Germany...eventually. For a moment, they had seemed on the brink of entering the war as a German ally, but now they were holding back.

Constantinople was hoping the war would end quickly, with a German victory, and was perhaps planning to make sure Germany was winning before making a full commitment. Although Enver Pasha himself was all in on a German alliance, the other Ottoman ministers were leaning more toward Britain and France, or toward neutrality.

Just as an Ottoman alliance with Germany would choke off Russian trade with Europe, an Ottoman alliance with the Entente would guarantee Russian trade and allow Britain and France to send military support directly to Russia. As it happened, though, London would prove slower than Berlin to appreciate the advantages of Ottoman support. Remember those two dreadnoughts the Ottoman Empire ordered from Britain? I hope so, because they are about to become central to our story.

[music: *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*]

We talked about the development of the dreadnought battleship back in episode 41. And I said at the time that the number of dreadnought battleships a nation had in its navy had become something like a proxy for measuring the naval power of a country. We saw, too, the decrepit state of the Ottoman Navy. In recent years it has been thoroughly outclassed by, first, the Italian Navy, and then, the Greek Navy, a sad and embarrassing end for an Empire that once dominated the Mediterranean.

The Three Pashas and their government had plans to repair the damage done to the Navy by decades of neglect. In 1911, the Ottoman government had ordered up a state-of-the-art dreadnought from the British Vickers company. Meanwhile, as you may recall, Brazil was astonishing the world by purchasing three British-made dreadnoughts and turning herself overnight into a major power. But following the Revolt of the Lash, in which the crews of the first two dreadnoughts mutinied, as well as an economic downturn in Europe and the collapse of the rubber boom, both of which meant the Brazilian government was no longer so flush with cash as it had been when it had first placed the order, the Brazilians abandoned their plans to

acquire that third dreadnought. The ship was sitting half-completed in a British shipyard, and was sold to the Ottoman Empire in late 1913.

It had cost the Empire about £6,000,000, or in modern terms, about US\$650,000,000, to purchase two dreadnoughts. Because the Empire was broke, a portion of the money was raised by public subscription: local clubs, taverns, and civic organizations across the Empire raised money privately to help restore the Empire's honor.

What would it mean for the Ottoman Empire to add two dreadnoughts to its Navy? Well, for comparison purposes, in 1914 the French Navy had two dreadnoughts in the Mediterranean, the Italian Navy had six, and the Austrian Navy had three. The British Mediterranean Fleet, stationed at Malta, had no actual dreadnoughts, although it did have three modern battlecruisers. We'll get back to them in a few minutes, I can assure you. But the point is, two dreadnoughts added to the Ottoman Navy wouldn't make it the dominant force in the Mediterranean, but it would be enough to make the other Mediterranean naval powers to sit up and take notice. They would also make the Russians sit up and take notice, since the Ottoman Navy also has easy access to the Black Sea, where Russia has precisely zero dreadnoughts.

By July 1914, these two ships were almost complete. They were undergoing sea trials, and a crew of Turkish officers and sailors was already in Britain, ready to take charge of the first ship and bring it home to Constantinople. But after the Austrian declaration of war on Serbia, the British First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, asked the Cabinet to requisition the two dreadnoughts for the Royal Navy, in light of the developing national emergency. Sorry, Ottoman Empire. But don't worry; we'll compensate you for the loss of your ships...someday... maybe after the war is over....

Well, while the British position was understandable, you can imagine how the Ottomans felt about this. Those Turkish sailors already in Britain threatened to just board the ship and take possession of it for the Empire, with or without British consent, and were informed that the British authorities were prepared to use force to prevent that from happening. And recall that all this is going on at the same time that the government in Constantinople is debating which side to support in the developing Great War.

Okay, with all that in mind let's turn our attention back to the situation in the Mediterranean on August 2, 1914. At this point, Germany is at war with Russia. Britain is still neutral, but is preparing to send the German government an ultimatum regarding its invasion of neutral Belgium. *Goeben* and *Breslau* are coaling at the Italian port of Messina, and the German sailors are rushing about like madmen in the August heat, trying to load as much coal as possible before the Italians force the German warships to leave the port. Farther west, the French are sending transport ships to their North African ports, because the French Army has three divisions of colonial troops stationed in North Africa. And as France mobilizes for the coming showdown

with Germany, those three divisions could be crucial, and the French want them on the front lines in Europe as soon as possible.

Now, this is where the presence of *Goeben* and *Breslau* in the Mediterranean becomes important. *Goeben* is a battlecruiser, which, as they say, means she can outgun anything she can't outrun, and can outrun anything she can't outgun. Since these are the only two German ships in the Mediterranean, and they are both very fast, the French judged it likely they would try to escape through the Strait of Gibraltar and return to their home port of Kiel in Germany. If they hurry, they might make the trip before war with France, or especially Britain, is officially declared. But if they try that, they are going to cut right across the shipping lanes the French will be using to bring their troops from North Africa.

France has only two dreadnoughts in her navy, and they are the only ships capable of holding their own against *Goeben*, but they aren't as fast and they can't be everywhere. What's to stop *Goeben* from charging straight into a French convoy, opening up her huge guns on defenseless transport ships, potentially killing hundreds or even thousands, of French soldiers, and then darting away before the French Navy can close in and fire back?

Yes, *Goeben* was a serious threat, and the French were crying out to the British for help. And the First Lord of the Admiralty answered their call by ordering the commander of the Mediterranean Fleet into action. The commander of the British Mediterranean Fleet was the 59-year old Admiral Sir Archibald Berkeley Milne. Milne was the son and the grandson of Royal Navy admirals. He was a lifelong bachelor, best known for his hobby of growing rare orchids and his gift for chatting up the ladies. He put both those skills to work during his time as commander of the royal yachts, befriending King Edward VII and Mrs. King Edward VII, that is to say, Queen Alexandra, who liked to call him "Arky-Barky." (And no, I am not making this up.) In 1912, when the post of commander of the Mediterranean Fleet became vacant, Winston Churchill appointed Arky-Barky to the position, over the strenuous objections of the now-retired Admiral Sir Jackie Fisher, who declared Milne unfit for the post and declared him "utterly useless."

On August 2, as Italy was declaring its neutrality and shoing *Goeben* and *Breslau* out of Messina, and Britain not yet officially a combatant, Milne received a cable from Churchill, ordering him to send two of his battlecruisers to shadow *Goeben*. Milne complied, sending two of his three battlecruisers, *Indomitable* and *Indefatigable*, west from Malta toward the Algerian coast. Most of the rest of his fleet he sent to the mouth of the Adriatic, to watch for an attempt by the Austrian Navy to break into the Mediterranean, but he also sent a light cruiser, *Chatham*, around the southern coast of Sicily to run the Strait of Messina just in case *Goeben* and *Breslau* left that way.

In fact, *Goeben* and *Breslau* had left Messina in the small hours of August 3. Admiral Souchon, having received no orders, devised his own plan. He wasn't daring enough to try to attack French shipping, as the French had feared, but he did order his two ships to the North African coast,

where they would be in a position to disrupt the French troop transfers by attacking the ports where the soldiers were embarking. Just after dawn, mere hours after Souchon had left, *Chatham* ran the strait and radioed back to Admiral Milne that *Goeben* was nowhere to be seen. That meant Souchon was definitely heading west, which is what the British and the French expected and feared.

But how to find him? Radar hadn't been invented yet, so the only way to find an enemy ship is to, you know, spot it. With your eyes. Or binoculars. And since the German ships were so fast, it wasn't feasible to try to catch up to them from behind. The best option was to try to get in front of them, and let them come to you. The French were notified that *Goeben* was heading their way, so the French commander ordered the transports to form up into convoys and sent three squadrons of French Navy ships south to meet up with these convoys coming out of Oran, Algiers, and Philippeville. At dusk that afternoon, as *Goeben* was steaming westward at full speed toward Algeria, Souchon received a wireless message that Germany was at war with France. He continued on. In the wee hours of August 4, as his ships were approaching their targets, Souchon finally received orders from the German Admiralty: "Alliance with Turkey concluded August 3. Proceed at once to Constantinople." Constantinople? Are you kidding me?

Souchon decided he was too close to his targets to give up now, and so he ordered the ships to follow through with the attack plan. At dawn on August 4, with the Algerian coast coming into view, the German ships ran up Russian flags and attacked. By the way, German military regulations of the time specifically permitted commanders of German naval vessels to use enemy or neutral flags for the sake of deception, even though Germany was a signatory to the Hague Convention, which had specifically, um, prohibited it.

Goeben bombarded the French port of Philippeville, and *Breslau* fired on the smaller port of Bône that morning. For the sake of those of you who are into ancient history, these were in ancient times the port cities of Rusicade (if that's how you say it) and Hippo Regius, respectively. Anyway, after that was done, Souchon ordered his ships to turn west, back to Messina to refuel, and then on to Constantinople, per his orders.

Later that morning, *Indomitable* and *Indefatigable*, which had been steaming westward from Malta since Milne had sent them to hunt for *Goeben*, found the Germans headed in the opposite direction. But Britain still had not yet declared war on Germany. If she had, this might well have been the end of this week's episode right here. But she hadn't. The Germans and the British steamed past each other at a distance of about five miles. They trained their guns on each other, just in case, but no one fired. Souchon ordered his ships to accelerate to best possible speed, while the British ships turned around and made to follow them.

Milne sent a wireless message to the Admiralty: "*Indomitable* and *Indefatigable* shadowing *Goeben* and *Breslau*, 37° 44' N, 7° 56' E." The Admiralty replied, "Very good. Hold her. War imminent."

Unfortunately, Milne had neglected to report which direction Souchon was headed, and everyone in London took his message to mean the Germans were headed west. Churchill practically begged the Cabinet for permission to engage the German ships at once, but the Cabinet refused to allow it. They were all still assuming that Souchon's next move would either be to engage the French or try to escape through the Strait of Gibraltar. That she might have a mission in the east had completely escaped everyone.

Souchon pushed *Goeben* as hard as he could, in a bid to escape the British. Remember that repairs on her boilers were still not complete, and the best she could do was 24 knots. The ship's stokers, who normally were only asked to work two-hour shifts, were kept on duty all day shoveling coal in August weather while steam was escaping from gaps in the boiler tubes all around them. Four of these stokers died that afternoon.

But it worked. The British ships were also less than perfectly fit, and short on stokers. As the day wore on, *Goeben* and *Breslau* gradually pulled away. As night fell and the fog rolled in, the German ships slipped out of sight, near the coast of Sicily.

But it wasn't hard to guess that Souchon had ordered his ships back to Messina to take on more coal. And by the following morning, August 5, Britain was finally, officially at war with Germany, meaning the Royal Navy could now freely fire on German ships. But a new complication had arisen. In light of Italian neutrality, the British government, hoping to tempt Italy into joining the Entente, was now very, very keen on respecting Italian neutrality and, generally speaking, not doing anything that might annoy or provoke the Italians. So the order went out that no Royal Navy vessel approach within six nautical miles of Italian territory.

Yeah, that's going to be a problem, because it means no British ships in the Strait of Messina. So Milne stationed ships at both ends of the strait, intending to pounce on the Germans as soon as they emerged, one way or the other. But he was still thinking it most likely that Souchon would head west. Milne boarded his flagship, *Inflexible*, the third battlecruiser under his command, and headed from Malta into the Tyrrhenian Sea to relieve *Indomitable*, which was sent to refuel. Instead of sending *Indomitable* all the way back to Malta, Milne sent her to Tunisia, to refuel at a French port, where she would be better positioned to intercept the Germans when they made their move west. Into the Ionian Sea, the other possible escape route, Milne ordered only one ship, the light cruiser *Gloucester*, to keep watch.

Meanwhile, Souchon and his ships were coaling at Messina. The Italian port authorities were insisting on strict adherence to the 24-hour rule, and would not sell coal to the German warships, as that also would have been a violation of the laws of neutrality. And so the coal came from German merchant ships that had come in response to Souchon's call. In order to get the maximum amount of coal aboard *Goeben* and *Breslau* in the time the Italians were allotting, the Germans ripped out decks and railings from the civilian ships to facilitate unloading their coal. Every available crew member was pressed into service. The band played patriotic music and the

officers handed out beer to encourage their crews to work ever harder and faster under the August sun, until the decks of both ships were littered with shirtless men, exhausted or unconscious.

While his crews struggled with the physical challenges of coaling the ships, Admiral Souchon puzzled over two cables he had received from the Imperial Admiralty during his stop at Messina. The first cable rescinded that order to go to Constantinople, in light of the Ottomans suddenly hedging on the alliance deal. The second cable informed Souchon that the Austrian Navy could offer no support in the Mediterranean, and left it to Souchon's discretion where to go next.

At last the German sailors reached the point where they had given their all. There was no one left standing. Souchon ordered a halt to the coaling at noon, and gave everyone five hours to rest before the deadline came and they would have to leave. That would be 5:00 PM on August 6.

But where to go? If *Goeben* were in peak condition, it might have been possible to run the British blockade in the Tyrrhenian Sea as well as the Strait of Gibraltar and maybe even make it back to Kiel. But she wasn't in peak condition. She was still leaking steam. Anyway, there wasn't enough coal to take the ship all the way home. There wasn't even enough coal to take the ship to Constantinople, his original destination before the new orders came. If Souchon could slip his ships into the Adriatic, he might get them to the Austrian naval base at Pola, but he didn't like that idea. Likely the Austrian fleet would spend the war sitting in port, and *Goeben* and *Breslau* would be sitting there with them, reliant upon Austrian hospitality.

Souchon made the critical decision to head for Constantinople anyway and hope for the best. At 5:00 with the sun still up, the two German ships left Messina. In town, the afternoon edition of one of the newspapers carried the headline VOYAGE TO DEATH OR GLORY.

[music: *Egmont* Overture]

Souchon steered his ships south through the Strait of Messina, where they encountered HMS *Gloucester*. Aboard *Gloucester*, where they were probably expecting nothing more than a few days of idle patrol duties, everyone jumped to alert. As a light cruiser, *Gloucester* could easily keep up with *Goeben*, but was she thoroughly outclassed in terms of firepower. Her only option here was to shadow the Germans well beyond the range of *Goeben's* guns—we're talking about something like twelve miles here—while sending Admiral Milne frantic wireless messages.

Souchon steered his ships around the toe of Italy and headed northeast, to give the appearance that he was making a run for the Adriatic. Milne still believed Souchon's move to the east was a feint, and that he would soon come about and make a break for the west. And if he really was headed for the Adriatic, well, there was a Royal Navy squadron already on station and in a position to intercept him.

Souchon's course for the Adriatic was indeed a feint, but not in the way Milne thought. Souchon's plan was to wait until dark, then lose *Gloucester* and change course to the southeast, where he had scheduled a rendezvous with a German collier off the southern coast of Greece. Night fell, but luck was not with Souchon. There was a full moon that night, and besides that, the coal the Germans had taken on at Messina was of poor quality and generated lots of soot. These steam warships put out clouds of black smoke under the best of conditions; now, *Goeben* was spewing dark plumes clearly visible by moonlight. So was *Gloucester*, whose captain had maneuvered her to port, to put *Goeben*'s smoke plume right in front of the full moon for easy viewing.

Goeben didn't have enough coal to keep up the false course for very long. At 10:00 PM, Souchon had no choice but to make the turn to the southeast, even though he was turning in full view of the British ship. Well, if we can't keep *Gloucester* from seeing the turn, maybe we can stop her from telling anyone about it. The Germans tried jamming her wireless, but that didn't work either. Milne gave up and ordered his other ships back to Malta. Now it was up to that other squadron, the one at the mouth of the Adriatic Sea.

That squadron was the Mediterranean Fleet's cruiser squadron, under the command of the 52-year old Admiral Ernest Troubridge. The squadron included four cruisers, *Black Prince*, *Duke of Edinburgh*, *Warrior*, and Troubridge's flagship, HMS *Defence*, along with eight destroyers. Troubridge ordered his ships south, intending to intercept the Germans.

Troubridge had formerly been a naval attaché to Japan, and had been an eyewitness to some of the naval battles of the Russo-Japanese War. As a result, he knew better than most what the big guns of a battlecruiser like *Goeben* were capable of. It might seem as if *Goeben* would be outgunned by the combined firepower of Troubridge's four ships, but *Goeben*'s bigger guns had a longer range, and they were perfectly capable of taking out Troubridge's entire squadron, one ship at a time.

And so, Troubridge was leery of engaging *Goeben*. He had one trick up his sleeve; he took his squadron south at full speed, hoping to maneuver so they would be in front of *Goeben* at dawn. That would mean the German gunners would have the rising sun in their eyes when they tried to target the British ships. But at 4:00 AM, with dawn breaking and the whereabouts of *Goeben* still a mystery, Troubridge decided to abandon his interception attempt. The captain of *Defence* told him, "[T]his is the bravest thing you have ever done."

As the sun rose on the morning of August 7, only *Gloucester* maintained her pursuit of *Goeben*. Admiral Milne ordered *Gloucester* to come about, because he still expected *Goeben* to turn around and come west to attack those French transports, and was afraid *Gloucester* might be caught by surprise. The captain of *Gloucester*, perhaps still expecting Admiral Troubridge to show up, disregarded the order and tried to delay *Goeben* by engaging *Breslau*, hoping to force the bigger ship to turn around and come to *Breslau*'s aid, thus delaying both ships. It worked.

Gloucester fired on *Breslau*, *Goeben* came about and fired on *Gloucester*. No one scored any hits, but then *Goeben* resumed course, and *Gloucester* got a second message from Milne, insisting she break off pursuit and return to Malta at once, which she reluctantly did.

Admiral Milne had decided that if *Goeben* really was going into the Eastern Mediterranean, well, there was only one possible target that Souchon would have had in mind, and that was the Suez Canal, so he sent his battlecruisers east from Malta, intending to intercept *Goeben* before she reached Egypt.

But of course, Souchon was not headed for Egypt. He was headed for Constantinople. The German warships rendezvoused with their collier in the Aegean on August 9 and refueled as planned. Then Souchon turned north, sending a message to the German military attaché in Constantinople asking him to do whatever he could to get the Turks to allow Souchon into the Dardanelles. The strait was mined, so Souchon's ships would either need a Turkish pilot to show them the way, or they would have to run the strait without permission, a hostile and potentially dangerous move.

That night, *Goeben* received a brief wireless transmission with a cryptic suggestion: "Enter. Demand surrender of forts. Capture pilot."

Souchon wasn't sure what that meant. Was the instruction just to put on a show of force, so the Turks wouldn't lose face, or was he actually supposed to force his way into the strait? The Germans headed for the strait, arriving at the entrance at 5:00 PM on August 10. There sat the Ottoman fortress at Chanak. Would the Turks actually fire on them? Souchon ordered battle stations and approached slowly. The Germans ran up the signal flag that represented a request to be piloted through the strait. Then they waited.

The fortress asked the Ottoman War Ministry for instructions. As it happened, it was a member of that German military mission in Constantinople, a Colonel von Kress, who brought the request to the War Minister, Enver Pasha.

Enver, you'll recall, was the most prominent pro-German figure in the Ottoman government. When he received the message, he told von Kress this was too big a decision for him to make on his own authority. He would have to consult with the Grand Vizier. Von Kress told him there wasn't time; the fortress needed instructions at once. Enver sat quietly for a moment and thought, while von Kress held his breath. At last, Enver said, "They are to be allowed to enter."

And so *Goeben* and *Breslau* arrived at Constantinople. At the suggestion of the Ottoman government, Germany made a show of "selling" the two ships to the Empire, offering them as substitutes for those two dreadnoughts that the British had seized. The crews of the two ships, all the way up to Admiral Souchon himself, were issued fezes and formally inducted into the Ottoman Navy.

But though this move made Germany popular with the Ottoman public, and though Enver Pasha was still keen on aiding Germany, the rest of the Ottoman government remained leery, and sat at the brink of war for two months, not quite ready to commit. Although the Ottoman Empire now had an alliance with Germany, Constantinople was making the Italian argument, that the alliance was defensive in nature and since Germany had declared war on Russia first, the Empire was not bound to assist her. But after the stunning German victories against the Russian Army in East Prussia, which we'll talk about later, Enver Pasha became increasingly convinced that the Empire should support Germany.

Of course, at this same time, British, French, and Russian diplomats were working feverishly at the Sublime Porte to persuade the Empire to remain neutral, while German diplomats were working just as feverishly to get the Ottomans to commit to the war. The Germans had the advantage of that military mission in Constantinople, which by this time numbered in the thousands, not to mention the officers and crew of *Goeben* and *Breslau*, now renamed to *Yavuz Sultan Selim* and *Midilli*, respectively.

In September, the Ottoman government took back control of tariff collections and post offices in the Empire, which had been under foreign administration, as well as unilaterally abrogating the agreements under which foreigners in the Empire were exempt from Ottoman law. These concessions had been made to the European powers as a part of the Empire's repayment plan for its huge foreign debt. These treaty arrangements had been humiliating to the Empire, of course, much like the unequal treaties imposed on China, but naturally they also represented valuable concessions to the foreign powers. Cutting off the debt repayment plan was a clear sign of which way the wind was blowing in Constantinople, and, if that wasn't enough, on September 28, the Ottoman government closed the Bosphorus, cutting off Russian trade and communication with her entente partners. Admiral Souchon was made commander-in-chief of the Ottoman Navy.

But officials in Constantinople continued to dither on the war question for the next four weeks, until Enver Pasha, working in collaboration with the Germans, decided to force their hand. Souchon took a squadron of Ottoman naval vessels, including *Yavuz Sultan Selim* and *Midilli*, into the Black Sea, supposedly on maneuvers. Once at sea, the ships were divided into four squadrons, which attacked the Russian ports of Odessa, Sevastopol, Feodosia, Yalta, and Novorossiysk. Port facilities were damaged, and several merchant ships were sunk or damaged, along with a few small Russian naval vessels.

The pro-Entente members of the Ottoman government were horrified, and quickly sent an apology to St. Petersburg. The Russian government responded with an ultimatum to expel the German military and naval missions from the Empire or else. The Ottomans refused, and first Russia, then France and Britain, declared war.

Historians argue to what degree the arrival of *Goeben* and *Breslau* at Constantinople contributed to the Ottoman decision to enter the war. They also argue to what degree the Ottoman Empire's

entry into the war benefitted Germany. But in his memoirs, Erich Ludendorff estimated that it prolonged the war by two years.

But there can be no argument that the *Goeben* and *Breslau* helped push the Empire into the war, nor that the entry of the Empire into the war prolonged it to some extent. Whole new front lines emerged, in Egypt, in the Caucasus, and in Mesopotamia. It probably pushed Bulgaria and Romania and Greece into the war. And it led to the awful bloodshed at Gallipoli.

Most crucially, it closed off Russia from the outside world. The loss of both the Baltic and Black Sea ports cut off 95% of Russia's foreign trade, forcing her to receive military assistance through the remote and difficult ports at Vladivostok and Archangel, which in turn stretched Russian railroads to the breaking point.

The collapse of the Russian Empire led to Leninism and the Soviet Union, with tremendous consequences for the entire world, consequences which would last through the twentieth century and beyond. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire led to the division of the Middle East into a patchwork of smaller states with arbitrary borders, to the establishment of the State of Israel, and to all the conflicts that followed. These conflicts would also last through the twentieth century and beyond, and continue to bedevil us to this very day.

Counterfactuals by their nature are impossible to prove. Did the flight of the *Goeben* really have such far-reaching consequences? It boggles the mind to think how different our world might be today, if either Souchon had been less imaginative, or if the British Admiralty had been more so.

The failure to see the political danger of the German ships may have been one of the most serious miscalculations of the century. Winston Churchill himself accused *Goeben* of "more slaughter, more misery, and more ruin than has ever before been borne within the compass of a ship."

We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks for listening, and I'd like to thank Randy and everyone else who have joined the podcast as patrons through the Patreon page. If you'd like to be a patron of the podcast, head on over to patreon.com/markpainter or visit the website at historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the button. Your patronage helps keep the podcast going, and while you're at the website, remember that each episode listing includes a playlist of the music you hear on the podcast, so if you heard something that made you curious, that's where to go to find out more. And you can leave a comment while you're there, or post on Facebook or tweet at the podcast. And if you haven't had a chance yet, head on over to iTunes and leave a rating and review for the podcast, which is another way you can help support what we're doing.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn our attention back to the Western Front for the next chapter. Do you remember when I told you back in episode 81 that the French thought they had the answer for a large-scale German offensive

through Belgium, in the form of an aggressive counteroffensive into Lorraine? Well, that's exactly what Marshal Joffre is about to try; find out how it all worked out. Spoiler alert: not so well. "So Much the Better," next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. When it became clear to the British that the escape of *Goeben* and *Breslau* to Constantinople had been a serious setback for the Entente Powers, Admirals Milne and Troubridge came under heavy criticism. They defended themselves based on the orders they had received from the Admiralty, which stated that their top priority was to protect the French transports and also specifically stated that they should not engage a superior force. A review of the affair exonerated Milne, but he had been relieved of his command and received no significant assignments afterward. He retired in 1919 and passed away in 1938 at the age of 83.

Admiral Troubridge was court-martialed for his decision not to engage *Goeben*, but was acquitted. But like Milne, his reputation suffered. He was given command of the British naval mission to Serbia and served there for the rest of the war. He retired in 1924, and died in 1926 at the age of 63.

[music: Closing Theme]

© 2017 by Mark Painter. All rights reserved.