‘The dominant idea is this: up to the month of August, 1914, France in every situation gave proof of the sincerity and permanence of her pacific intentions. The dominant fact is this: there is always a chance of avoiding war so long as it has not actually been declared, and it was Germany who declared war.’ Raymond Poincare, writing in the journal *Foreign Affairs*, 1925.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The years immediately preceding 1914 were of critical importance for the Franco-Russian alliance. Through crises which included the Balkan Wars and the lesser-known Liman von Sanders crisis, Russo-German relations reached an all-time low, and military reforms enhanced the army size and potency of the Entente. Key officials and changes in leadership at Paris and St Petersburg established significant trends and identified new theatres where the alliance could be applied. The narrative is not one of preparation for war, but for increasing the defensive capabilities of the two allies, closing ranks with the British, and formulating a war plan for the worst-case scenario which would protect their strategic interests. Predictably, making these plans and finalising these agreements ruffled the feathers of Berlin and Vienna, but by the eve of war, France and Russia were closer than they ever had been, and lessons had been internalised which influenced how both reacted to the July Crisis. The story is a fascinating one, but it is also dense and detailed, so we’re going to cover it over the next three episodes, as we bring the Franco-Russian alliance from its resurgence in 1912 to its consolidation in summer 1914. In this first part, we will assess the role of figures like Raymond Poincare and Sergei Sazonov, as they attempted to rebuild what several diplomatic defeats had damaged.

By summer 1912, Franco-Russian relations were at something of a crossroads. The alliance between Paris and St Petersburg was nearly two decades old, and since its formation it had transformed the international situation. In the simplest terms, the Franco-Russian alliance ended French isolation in Europe, pulled Russia away from Berlin’s orbit, and suggested that a new power bloc was about to emerge. For the first decade of the twentieth century, Russia and France endured the waxing and waning of their fortunes. Russia’s loss to Japan appeared to fatally weaken the alliance, though it did provide the impetus behind a new Anglo-French Entente. The loss rendered Russia vulnerable to military predation, but also more eager for the influx of French finance which could stabilise the turbulent Russian regime. Yet this support could not overcome the imbalance between the two blocs. The Dual Alliance of Germany and Austria-Hungary became more ambitious and aggressive, recognising a new opportunity for advantage.

In the face of this hostility, we might expect Russia and France to cleave closer together, removing all caveats from their alliance, while planning for a joint war effort in the near future. In fact, the pre-war years up to 1912 reveal something surprising about the Franco-Russian alliance. A pattern was emerging; Paris wished for Russia to stand ready in the event of a German mobilised against France, but the French government refused to provide the same guarantee if Austria mobilised against Russia. This fine print of the alliance suggested that mutual support would only go so far. If a crisis threatened in the Balkans, or in North Africa, each power would consider its own interests first. Thus, during the Bosnian Annexation Crisis, France refused to support Russia against Austria since it perceived none of its vital interests were at stake. During the two Moroccan crises of 1905 and 1911, Russia offered its moral support, but made it clear that it was not yet ready to go to war.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In January 1912, this trend began to change with the arrival of a new French Premier, Raymond Poincare. It would be fair to say that Poincare held a grudge against Germany; he was only ten when the Germans invaded his hometown, occupying it for three years. This formative experience did not make Poincare a revanchist, but it did instil within him an understanding of French security interests. These interests, Poincare insisted, could be best assured by investing more heavily in the Russian alliance. This was a popular contention by the time he became Premier. Indeed, in the aftermath of the Second Moroccan Crisis, lasting the summer of 1911, a new wave of chauvinist sentiment historians have termed the ‘Nationalist Revival’ swept through French politics. Made up mostly of young, educated Parisians, this nationalist movement emphasised the need for a revival of French military power and a consolidation of her security. In Poincare, the movement had its champion; he took power just as Italian forces were sweeping into Ottoman Libya. Italy, an ally of Berlin and Vienna, was willing to take matters into its own hands, and leverage its military power to acquire advantages denied to it by diplomacy. Could France not pursue similar advantages, with St Petersburg at her back?

Poincare identified an important plank in this approach. Where before the Balkans had represented the limits of the alliance, the French Premier now signalled that this limitation was now removed. In March 1912 Poincare explained to Izvolsky, the Russian ambassador to France, how conflict in the Balkans would upset the ‘equilibrium of Europe,’ and thus ‘any collision between Russia and Austria-Hungary on account of Balkan affairs,’ would ‘entail the activation of the Franco-Russian alliance.’ This was a significant development, not least because during the following months, Russia continued to construct the Balkan League. When Poincare requested more details of Russian activities in this theatre – particularly regarding the alliance between Bulgaria and Serbia – he was shocked when the extent of Russia’s involvement was revealed to him. Speaking to Sazonov, the Russian Foreign Minister, in August 1912, Poincare learned of the hostility towards Turkey and Austria which formed the bedrock of that Balkan alliance. He was also troubled by the role of arbiter in all future disputes which had assigned itself under this alliance treaty. As Poincare noted:

It seems that the treaty contains the seeds not only of a war against Turkey but of a war against Austria. Moreover, it establishes the hegemony of Russia over the Slav kingdoms, since Russia is identified as the arbiter in all questions. I remark to M. Sazonov that this convention does not correspond in the least to the information that I had been given about it, that if the truth be told, it is a convention of war, and that it not only reveals the ulterior motives of the Serbs and Bulgarians, but also gives reason to fear that their hopes are being encouraged by Russia.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Poincare was closer to the truth than he may have realised at the time. Barely two months after these conversations took place, the Balkan League made its play against the Ottoman territories in Europe. The First Balkan War was the consequence. We might have expected Poincare to experience buyer’s remorse upon learning of the extent of Russian involvement in the Balkans. Did this not guarantee a future of confrontations and entanglements in that troubled peninsula? Did this not also suggest that France should proceed cautiously, perhaps retreating from its commitment to aid Russia in that theatre? In fact, Poincare was not repelled by these revelations. He did not retreat, rather, he doubled down. We may debate the French Premier’s decision to further entrench French interests in such an unstable region, but it seems Poincare gauged that the Balkans had become too important to ignore. In the event of an Austro-Serb war, Poincare judged, the interconnected nature of the fronts would mean that Germany would have to compensate for its distracted ally by pulling forces away from the west to deal with Russia.

The First Balkan War represented the litmus test of Poincare’s new direction. When Austria and Russia mobilised against one another through autumn and winter 1912, it seemed possible that matters might escalate. Again, Poincare did not back down. On 4 November 1912, the French Premier proposed to Sazonov that the Triple Entente should rally its forces against Austria, warning Vienna against any intervention against Serbia. Significantly – where in 1909 France had disputed that its interest were at stake in the Balkans – now Poincare asserted that Austria’s conquest of Serbia *would* affect these interests, which would have to be defended. Izvolsky recognised this as a new outlook for French foreign policy. ‘If Russia goes to war, France will do the same,’ Poincare asserted, ‘because we know that in this matter, Germany will back Austria.’

Similarly, he told the Italian ambassador that ‘should the Austro-Serb conflict lead to a general war, Russia could count entirely on the armed support of France.’ Poincare seems to have blended French security interests with the prevailing hostility towards Germany and sympathy for Slav nations. As Poincare explained: ‘the Triple Entente would have the greatest chances of success and could achieve a victory that would permit it to redraw the map of Europe, despite Austria’s local Balkan successes.’ As Austro-Russian tensions increased into 1913, Poincare maintained that any Austrian expansion in the Balkans would require compensation for France in another theatre; the French Premier, incredibly, suggested an island in the Aegean for this purpose. Was Poincare conceiving of a new Mediterranean empire, or was he here signalling that the Balkans was now central to the considerations of the Franco-Russian alliance? Poincare’s contemporaries suspected it was the latter, yet they warned against taking on commitments which would render her Balkan policy reactionary and reduce French flexibility.[[4]](#footnote-4)

We should not imagine that Poincare was the sole mover behind this new mood of French activism in the Balkans. Alexander Millerand was French Minister for War and a friend of Poincare, whom he had met while attending the same school. Although on paper Millerand was a socialist, he had embraced the nationalist wave in French politics, and believed the French people had to be instilled with a newfound martial spirit. Under his direction, the French army would be expanded – the Three Year Law made such expansion possible. In a conversation with the Russian military attaché in mid-December 1912 – right at the point when Austrian mobilisation was increasing the tension – Millerand asked ‘What do you think is the objective of the Austrian mobilisation?’ The attaché responded that ‘predictions are difficult,’ but it appeared defensive in character. To this moderate reply, Millerand challenged whether the occupation of Bosnia and threats to Serbia represented a casus belli for Russia. ‘I cannot answer this question,’ the attaché replied, ‘but I know that we have no desire for a European war, or to take any steps that could provoke a European conflagration.’ Other French Cabinet members might have been assured by this reply, but Millerand was not. ‘So, you’ll have to leave Serbia on her own?’ he challenged. ‘That of course is your business. But it should be understood that this is not on account of our fault. We are ready.’

Millerand emphasised that it was not a matter of Albania, or even of Serbia, but of ‘Austrian hegemony on the entire Balkan peninsula.’ This would jeopardise French interests, since it had now been accepted that a war in the Balkans which dragged in Austria and distracted the Triple Alliance would suit France best. But Sazonov was far from ready to activate this commitment. Despite costly countermobilizations against Austria, Sazonov did not believe that the time had arrived for an Austro-Russian war. The Russian recovery from 1905 was incomplete, so Sazonov sent several informal communiques in the last weeks of 1912, urging the French to calm down. Perhaps Poincare was overcompensating; perhaps he believed that to make up for France’s lacklustre support in 1909, a more forward policy was necessary. He certainly was not deterred by domestic politics. In an unprecedented step for the French Republic, Poincare transitioned seamlessly from the position of Premier to that of President in January 1913. Bucking past trends and traditions, Poincare did not intend to serve as a mere figurehead, but to gather all constitutional power and prerogatives in his hands. He also leveraged his political influence, placing men in office who lacked experience of foreign affairs and would thus be expected to defer to his judgement.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Poincare’s renewed commitment to Russia’s Balkan interests was also leveraged. The French Premier had long insisted that Germany was the central threat to the Entente, and worked to focus Russian thinking in this direction. St Petersburg was understandably apprehensive at underrating Austro-Hungarian power. If Vienna was left free to conquer the Balkans while Russia fought Germany, this would be disastrous for Russian influence and its claims to protect all Slavs. In response Poincare continued to emphasise the centrality of Germany. Conversations between the two generals staffs developed detailed plans for deployments on the German border in the event of war. Russia was able to commit to sending an army of 800,000 men against Berlin by the fifteenth day of mobilisation. The following year in 1913, this was reduced to thirteen days. French officers tenaciously pressed the point of Germany, and this pressure seems to have had the intended effect. By 1914, Germany was recognised as the principal adversary of the Franco-Russian alliance. Central to this strategy of focusing Russian attentions against the Germans was the role of French finance. Specifically, French loans and investment in Russian infrastructure, seen most clearly in the development of Russian railways.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The Franco-Prussian War had demonstrated the dramatic impact of organised railways on the deployment and provision of soldiers. To the French, it signified that defensive measures in the future would have to be developed with native railway infrastructure in mind. To the Russians, ruling over an incomparably vast empire, railways were essential to pull the nation into modernity, and facilitate the projection of its equally vast reserves of power. Yet, there was a difference in form and function between military and economic railways. To develop the Russian state, rail could link key cities and resources, but to prepare the Russian army, rail connections to vital military installations and transport hubs were also required. Successive Russian finance ministers after 1905 emphasised the economic necessity of rail disconnected from the military imperatives; Russian industry required that civilian rail expand, without substantively threatening strategic requirements. Among these was Sergei Witte, Finance Minister of Russia in the 1890s, and later Russia’s first Premier, who said regarding rail that:

During my financial administration I doubled the railway network, but the military were constantly hindering me in this. They supported me only when I was proposing to construct railways which in their opinion had some strategic significance. Thus against my advice it was decided to construct strategic, or primarily strategic, railways… Apart from this, economic railways were diverted due to hardly convincing reasons, whilst it was noticeable that some military specialists declared that strategic considerations demanded the immediate construction of the railway in question, and others found the same railway harmful from a military point of view… Thus I tried to develop the railway network as best I could, but military considerations, on whose side His Majesty naturally was for the most part, significantly hindered the building of the railways.[[7]](#footnote-7)

It was thus a delicate balancing act between Russia’s economic needs and her military plans, particularly when the French insisted that military railways remain the priority. We also see the Tsar fluctuate between prioritising military rail and rail for economic interests; Sergei Witte was said in some cases to have his ear, yet on other occasions the military interest was triumphant. It may appear akin to a schizophrenic atmosphere, and hardly suitable for the basis of a lasting alliance, but in broader terms, the Franco-Russian alliance was from the very beginning a question of give and take. In simple terms, Russia needed money, France needed security, thus from the moment the two general staffs began meeting annually from 1900, the question of railways became a constant feature. To transport so many hundreds of thousands of men across such vast distances, functioning railways designed with military efficiency in mind were essential, but this did not mean that the Russians intended to spend every new glut of French funding on railways alone. Indeed, following the loss to Japan and subsequent revolts, it was clear that the Tsar would have to spend heavily in several departments if Russia was to claw back its lost powers.

In 1899 and 1902, Russia acquired two French loans each worth 200 million rubels. Notably, in the negotiations for the second loan, the French only accepted on the condition that Russia did not request any additional loans for three years.[[8]](#footnote-8) Fortunately for Russia, this deadline expired in the nick of time. After it was defeated by Japan, conservative French estimates judged that Russia’s army would require at least three years before it was recovered from the loss. Implicit in this need was the necessity of additional French funding, and another loan was approved in 1906. Interestingly, from this point the French insisted that any new loan had to first be approved by the Russia’s new parliament, the Duma, suggesting that the French wanted to preserve the new constitutional arrangement born out of the recent revolts. This imperative was also insisted upon in two additional loans in 1909 and 1913. However, in this period of acute Russian weakness and recovery, the French toned down their requests for strategic railways. Only once General Josef Joffre became Chief of the French General Staff in 1911, and Poincare became premier in January 1912, did the Franco-Russian alliance return to its rail-oriented roots.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Historians have even argued that in the period before the war, Russian financial interests were so enmeshed with its foreign policy that the Finance Minister undercut the Foreign Minister in importance. It was simply impossible for Russia to make any substantial foreign engagements until her Finance Ministry approved it first. When Kokovstov became Premier in 1911, he retained his former position of Finance Minister, holding both posts at the same time, and underlining the high premium the Tsar placed on his financial expertise. Unfortunately for Kokovstov, he found that in financial matters, the French still held the advantage, and still pressed for obligations from the Russians, above all in the area of railway construction. Under Poincare’s more direct involvement in the Franco-Russian alliance – including a visit to St Petersburg in summer 1912 – the railway was reasserted as France’s main condition in the loan program.

This theme was maintained in spring 1913, when Theophile Delcassé was appointed ambassador to Russia. On 25 March, a single day after he arrived in St Petersburg, the new ambassador pressed the Tsar on the necessity of ‘completing the network of railways, in conformity with the wishes of the Chief of Staff.’ Shortly after, Delcassé asked Kokovstov directly how much money would be spent on the project. Delcassé had been Foreign Minister during the First Moroccan Crisis, but more relevantly, he had been instrumental in the initial drive for strategic railways at the turn of the century, even if a handful of these had been directed against British imperial interests. This was a clear sign that Poincare intended to press the strategic railway card with continued vigour, and his domestic politics were such that the Russians would be made to marvel at the renewed French commitment to the alliance. It had its intended effect; before the end of March 1913, the Russians Ministerial Council, with the Tsar’s approval, had authorised construction on the next phase of strategic railways.[[10]](#footnote-10)

By August 1913, the two general staffs met once again in St Petersburg, and General Joffre again raised the railway issue. He left the Russian capital somewhat miffed that his counterparts had not been more enthusiastic, yet still assured that the strategic railway plans had been greatly improved. Shortly thereafter, the Duma approved a new French loan. An annual payment of between 400 and 500 million rubels would be paid over five years, and in return, the Russians would prioritise those strategic railway plans as discussed by the two general staffs. Among those opposed to these conditions was Kokovstov. Like Sergei Witte before him, this Finance Minister loathed the high French demands, and he longed to invest French monies in the Russian economy instead. In a bid to persuade his allies to reduce their demands, Kokovstov travelled to Paris late in 1913, but Poincare’s Cabinet held firm. Remarkably, the Russian government was made to commit to the following internal declaration: ‘The railway works declared necessary by the French and Russian General Staffs during their meeting in August 1913 will be started as soon as possible, in order that they may be completed within a four-year period.’

It is worth reflecting on the fact that just as the negotiations for this final pre-war loan were concluded in January 1914, Kokovstov was dismissed from his posts of Premier and Finance Minister. His departure was not likely to reduce militarist sentiments among Russian Ministers, since Kokovstov had been viewed as a moderate voice, risk averse in foreign policy, and accommodating towards the Central Powers. Kokovstov’s exit may even have aided the French, but there were also downsides to Kokovstov’s absence, as subsequent Russian policy would prove. Still, had the French then gauged their progress in the twenty years since the creation of the alliance, they would rightly have judged themselves the victors. Time and again, the Russians had requested loans, and time and again, the French had driven a hard bargain, insisting on strategic railways as the condition for the sum.

The story of this extensive French investment in Russia’s railway networks before 1914 is often upheld as an example of the benefits of the alliance. Of course, French finance was spent in places other than Russia’s military railways. Yet, what is often not brought forward is the fact that this policy of railway construction – particularly in comparison to Russia’s neighbours – was an abject failure. Russia had eleven times fewer railways per unit area than Germany, and seven times fewer than Austria-Hungary. Double-tracking – the process of expanding the volume of a railway line with a second line beside the original one – had only been completed for a quarter of Russian tracks by 1914, far fewer than that of Germany. We may debate if Russia would have invested French money into more productive enterprises without these conditions, but by any reasonable metric, the French investments had not fixed Russia’s infrastructural problems, and they had failed to prepare Russia’s railways for the strains of total war.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Poincare had nonetheless made great progress in the reconstruction of Russian power, and this was just as well for the alliance. Only a few months after the Balkan Wars had ended, a new crisis in Russo-German relations emerged. The Ottoman Empire had been badly damaged by the loss of its Balkan possessions. The Young Turk leadership noted the poor performance of its armies, and it was determined that the army in Constantinople should be reorganised around a new commander. The decision was made to recruit a German General for this task, by the name of Liman von Sanders. Sanders would reside in Constantinople and increase the standards of the army stationed there. For St Petersburg, the spectacle of its German rival seizing command of a strategically sensitive region was unacceptable. The German mission threatened Russia’s interests in the Straits, interests which had repeatedly been raised since the Bosnian Annexation Crisis. So acute was the German challenge felt to be, that the crisis left Russo-German relations badly damaged, and racked with mistrust, just at a point when cooperation and compromise were needed most.

But was the Russian reaction proportional, or just a result of feverish paranoia? It helps to look at some of the details of this German mission. The Liman von Sanders mission, consisting of 42 German officers with Sanders in overall command of the Turkish 1st Army Corps, had in fact been in the pipeline for several months. As the Balkan League continued to devastate the Ottoman armies, European powers kept a watchful eye on Constantinople, in the case of a revolt or coup which would topple the Sultan once and for all. At the same time, Berlin watched for opportunities. As the German ambassador in Constantinople Hans von Wangenheim recorded in April 1913, there were sound reasons for seeking influence in the battered Turkish armies:

The Power which controlled the army would always be the strongest in Turkey.... No anti-German government would be able to keep itself in power if the army is controlled by us… Also to entrust Germany with the reform of the system of education opens before us as yet unseen possibilities to imbue the Turkish people with the German spirit, and through the machinery of the Turkish State, to achieve tasks, the resources for which until now we ourselves have had to furnish to German schools in Turkey.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Wangenheim sent several reports to Berlin throughout the summer of 1913, gauging the remaining strength of the Ottoman state, and its capacity to resist further incursions or foreign efforts at partition. Wangenheim was not optimistic that Turkey could stand on its own two feet after the successive losses to its Balkan foes, but he insisted that she should be preserved and protected from partition. Wangenheim appreciated that Germany lacked concrete plans for the partition of Turkey, and though he provided Berlin with a map indicating Germany’s potential sphere of influence in a partitioned Asia Minor, he advocated cooperation with Britain to prevent a scramble for Turkish territory which Berlin was not prepared for. On 22 May 1913, Wangenheim reported that the Grand Vizier had requested ‘a leading German General for the Turkish army,’ a result of the Ottoman conviction ‘that Germany's policy was upright and earnestly directed toward the consolidation of Asiatic Turkey and that this could only be secured through a thorough reorganisation of the Turkish army.’[[13]](#footnote-13)

At the wedding of the Kaiser’s daughter in late May 1913, both the Russian Tsar and King George V of Britain were in attendance. There, Wilhelm informed them of the plan to send German officers to rebuild the Turkish army. It met with the approval of Wilhelm’s royal relations; King George reflected that the request was similar to Britain’s efforts to reform Turkey’s navy and police, while the Tsar believed this would dissuade the Bulgarians from pushing towards Constantinople. We should recall from our Balkan Wars episode that Sazonov was greatly perturbed by Bulgaria’s successes, and had developed contingency plans for a landing at Constantinople if Bulgarian soldiers occupied the city. At this point, in other words, Russia was preoccupied with the overmighty ambitions of Bulgaria, rather than what the Germans were doing. Once the Balkan War ended, however, Russian attentions could be focused back to Germany; the temporary alignment of Russo-German interests in this respect was not recognised. The Kaiser, instead, took this reception as a blessing to proceed however he saw fit.[[14]](#footnote-14)

On 30 June 1913, the Kaiser officially appointed General Liman von Sanders as ‘Head of Mission’ to Constantinople. Extensive haggling with the Turks then followed in secret. It was necessary to wait for the conclusion of the Second Balkan War, which had just broken out, and to negotiate – through ambassador Wangenheim – on the composition of this mission. These negotiations, lasting throughout the summer, had reached their final phase by September. On 19 September 1913, von Wagenheim wrote to Berlin of the extensive powers the Liman von Sanders mission would now possess:

After long negotiations, the following project has been agreed to, in regard to the German Military Reorganisation Commission. To secure unity of the work of reorganisation, General Liman is to be the direct superior of all German officers in the service of the Turks. He is to undertake inspections throughout all Turkey. No foreign officer will be employed without his consent. He will have under his direction the entire system of military schools, which is especially important for the future of Turkey and the spread of German methods and language. He is to be a member of the Supreme War Council. His influence on the promotion of Turkish officers to the rank of general is definitive. The power of inflicting punishment, as possessed by a commanding general, is delegated to him. In contrast to the English Marine Mission, the contract of General Liman will run for five years instead of for two years, and transfers of Turkish officers inside of six months can take place only with his consent – these two provisions guarantee the necessary continuity of the military work. The failure to maintain continuity is known to have resulted in the catastrophes at the beginning of the war. About one million marks annually will be set aside for the Mission, while previously the German officers altogether have had to manage on less than 30,000 marks.[[15]](#footnote-15)

These were the main features of Liman’s mission, and they implied a far-reaching German goal to reassert its military and political influence at Constantinople. Russia might be expected to object, but had the Tsar and his Ministers not already been informed, and issued no protest? In the subsequent weeks the finishing touches were placed on the German-Turkish arrangement, just as Sazonov stopped off in Berlin. Meeting with Bethmann Hollweg and Arthur Zimmerman, Sazonov discussed the implications of the Balkan Wars, the recent ultimatums from Vienna against Serbia and Greece, and the potential for French and German officials to resolve minor differences. The tone was cordial, even friendly, but conspicuous in its absence was the Liman von Sanders mission. The German side later maintained that Sazonov was assumed to have been informed beforehand; the Russian side would dispute that Sazonov had any knowledge of the mission at all.

Regardless of who was telling the truth, troubling signs were emerging from St Petersburg that contrary to the acceptance given by the Tsar the previous May, the Russian government would oppose the mission. On 7 November Anatoly Neratov, acting Foreign Minister, then filling in for Sazonov while he traversed Europe, spoke with Helmut von Lucius, the German chargé d’affairs on rumours he had received that ‘an unusually large number of German General Staff officers and other officers, among them generals,’ would ‘soon enter the Turkish service for the reorganisation of the Turkish army and especially of the garrison of Constantinople.’ It was suspected that ‘In Constantinople a sort of model Division wholly after the German type and under the command of a German General was to be created.’ This act of empowering the Ottoman government’s military, and linking it to that of Germany in such a sensitive strategic region was one ‘which Russia cannot conceive of in any other way than as directed against herself.’ Sazonov’s deputy insisted that ‘Everything that transpires in Constantinople and the Straits is of the highest importance for Russia.’[[16]](#footnote-16)

When von Lucius, the German attaché, requested guidance from Berlin, Zimmerman advised him to ease Russian concerns. Neratov should be informed that the Turks wished to restore their independence after the Balkan Wars, and that the reform of the army was key to this goal. The Turks would decide the parameters of the German military mission, and Berlin took it for granted that Russia wished to prevent the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Implicit in these assumptions was that the scale of Russian power was such that it would not be perturbed by the appearance of a German mission to Constantinople – surely Russia did not fear *Turkish* power? Neratov affirmed Russia was not afraid of Ottoman power necessarily, but of the reinforcement of the Straits. Russia, Neratov advised, ‘could not remain indifferent, if, for example, the Dardanelles were strongly fortified, and guns, which had a range of 20 kilometres over the Black Sea, were placed at its entrance.’ Neratov warned that ‘Such fortifications, constructed on the advice of German officers, could only be directed against Russia.’ In response, Helmut von Lucius pointed to the British naval mission – did this not have similar goals? Why did Russia not object to the British initiative? Neratov replied that he would wait for Sazonov to return home; perhaps, the acting foreign minister said, Sazonov would not be as perturbed as he had been.[[17]](#footnote-17) This was a hint that a crisis could be in the offing once Sazonov returned from his European travels and learned the full extent of the Mission for himself. Indeed, much like what had occurred during the Bosnian Annexation Crisis, the Russian press proceeded to lead the way in fanning public outrage. Sazonov encouraged these expressions; by the time he returned to St Petersburg on 17 November 1913, the crisis was well underway.[[18]](#footnote-18)

By a fortunate coincidence, Russian Premier Kokovstov was then in Berlin. Kokovstov had been decorated with the High Prussian Order of the Black Eagle, an honorific which required the Russian Premier to give his thanks to the Kaiser in person. While in the German capital from 17 to 21 November 1913, Kokovstov would have an opportunity to sound out the Germans over the Liman von Sanders mission. Notably, by this point in his career Kokovstov was adhering to Sazonov’s instructions, and informed Bethmann Hollweg that his colleague was extremely perturbed. The Chancellor assured Kokovstov of Germany’s honourable intentions. There was no direct threat to Russia in the mission, which had been requested by the Turks. He had thought Sazonov knew of the mission, and had not informed him of it during their conversations for this reason. Russian power was so immense, how could she take offence at the appointment of a single corps? Bethmann Hollweg also alluded to the concerns relevant to every great power – if Germany had refused to send a mission, another power would have done so, and in light of Turkish military failures in the Balkan Wars, and Germany’s history of training these Turkish soldiers, a mission was necessary to reassert German military influence and repair damage done to her military reputation. Kokovstov was amenable to these arguments, but he outlined the Russian objections:

We take our stand on the principle that Constantinople must remain a Turkish capital, in whose integrity all the Great Powers are equally interested… The formation of an army corps, commanded by a German general and by officers under his orders, gives an entirely different complexion to that question. The Ambassadors of the Great Powers would therefore be placed under the guard of Germany alone.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Predictably, where Kokovstov made little headway with the German Chancellor, he made even less with the Kaiser. ‘I had the impression that my arguments were disagreeable to the Emperor of Germany,’ the Russian Premier noted, adding that Wilhelm II…

…hastened to declare that he did not at all understand how one could conceive the idea of any menace whatsoever for powerful Russia on the part of a Turkey so profoundly crushed and that the former system of instruction and inspection had only resulted in the most complete disasters and that he could not in any case consent to renew it.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Kokovstov nonetheless continued to try and acquire concessions. Could Liman von Sanders be moved from Constantinople to another Turkish base? Could he have his authority reduced if he remained in place? Bethmann Hollweg would not agree, but interpreted Kokovstov’s remarks as a sign that Russia would do nothing further, and tacitly agreed to the mission. In fact, Kokovstov professed himself filled with ‘a sentiment of anxiety and gave him grounds to believe that the German Government would not yield easily, if indeed it would yield, from the position which it had taken.’ Although complimenting the German Chancellor’s frankness and honesty, Kokovstov could not dissuade him from the Mission’s course, and it seemed unlikely that the Tsar’s Ministers could do better.[[21]](#footnote-21)

When German Foreign Minister Gottlieb von Jagow explained the developing crisis to the Kaiser on 23 November, the few day after Kokovstov had left Berlin for St Petersburg, he identified the Russian demand that General Sanders not reside in Constantinople. ‘Reforming work was necessary everywhere,’ Sazonov reportedly said, ‘the Near East was big.’ Could the Germans not modernise the Turkish army from another base, less strategically problematic to Russia? To this, Wilhelm wrote his typically uncompromising comments in the margins of this telegram, declaring:

Russia fears the strengthening of Turkey by us and the increase of her military strength or rather her usability by us against her when Russia will one day attack us! She wants to keep Turkey dying and wants to keep Istanbul as easy pickings! England will no doubt not want that! Russia in her greed for land pockets Manchuria, Mongolia, Northern Persia without us batting an eyelid. But if we send officers to Turkey, then Russian ‘public opinion’ is excited! If we went along with Russia’s wishes, we would simply lose our prestige in the Muslim world![[22]](#footnote-22)

This amounted to the final word. If the Kaiser would not modify the mission, his ministers could not be expected to do so either. In the face of Russian requests and some sterner language, the mission was quickly becoming a matter of national honour; Germany could not back down, lest it be perceived as weak, and it would lose influence if the Turks then sought their military succour elsewhere. Liman von Sanders was officially confirmed on 25 November, and he would sail for Constantinople to fulfil Germany’s military and political goals. If Sazonov could understand these imperatives, he did not have to accept them. Since bilateral relations had evidently failed, it was time to activate the Triple Entente, and see if Russia’s allies could help steer the crisis in her favour. On 25 November Sazonov informed the Russian chargé d’affairs in London that:

Our friendly suggestion has so far been answered evasively by the Berlin Cabinet. Consequently we deem it most desirable to ascertain whether the French and British Governments consider such a situation compatible with their interests. If it should appear inexpedient to raise further objections in Berlin, a joint step could be taken in Constantinople to point out to the Sublime Porte that the concessions made to Germany raised the question of equivalent compensations for other Powers.[[23]](#footnote-23)

That very day on 25 November, a counsellor of the British embassy in St Petersburg reported Sazonov’s growing hostility to the Liman von Sanders mission, which ‘greatly displeases the Emperor,’ and Sazonov ‘has complained to the German government that it was an unfriendly proceeding on their part not to mention the matter to him when in Berlin.’ His hostility established, Sazonov moved to consider possible compensation, as Grey was informed:

M. Sazonov considers that foreign Ambassadors will be placed in undignified position by fact that Turkish capital will be practically in hands of a German commander. He thinks it necessary that other powers should make some compensating demands of Turkish government. As to form which such demands should take, he mentioned appointment of Russian officers in Armenia and British officials in Asiatic Turkey.[[24]](#footnote-24)

But here Sazonov found Entente resolve wanting. Or, rather, he learned that neither Britain nor France was all that concerned at the German mission, though they were willing to go through the motions for Russia’s sake. Stephen Pichon, the French Foreign Minister, assured Sazonov that he made repeated representations to the Turkish ambassador in Paris: there was nothing more he could do under the circumstances. Grey made similarly sympathetic noises, explaining he would prefer a German mission with reduced powers, while advising Sazonov that compensation would be difficult, and warning of the chauvinistic tone of the Russian press. It was made plain that London and Paris would not go the length of war for the sake of the Liman von Sanders mission, but they could at least coordinate a joint policy of diplomatic opposition. On 2 December, the French Foreign Office understood that Sir Edward Grey had brought Britain on side, and that the following instructions had been issued to the British ambassador in Constantinople:

The assignment of the military command of Constantinople to a German General may have serious consequences not only for the Ottoman Empire but likewise for all Powers interested in the integrity of that Empire. The diplomatic corps accredited to Constantinople would be under the dependence of Germany; the key of the Straits would be in the hands of Germany; a German General could by his military measures hold in check the sovereignty of the Sultan. Furthermore, the balance of Powers, by which the very existence of Turkey is guaranteed, will be broken. To compensate the preponderance attributed to Germany, the other Powers would claim analogous advantages from Turkey. It is important that these considerations should be explained to the Ottoman Government. Please concert with your colleagues from France and Russia for the purpose of making a demarche in this sense at the Sublime Porte. You may express yourselves in virtually the same terms, but not collectively; it is important that the Ottoman Government have no occasion to doubt that an absolute entente has been established between England, France, and Russia on that question.[[25]](#footnote-25)

On the surface, this appears a firm statement of Entente cooperation in the face of a German challenge to the status quo. It also fit with Grey’s broad desire to maintain solid relationships with his Entente partners. If we look a little deeper though, we will see that the communication of concerns was as far as Britain appeared willing to go. Indeed, Grey’s communique amounted, for now, to the limit of Entente solidarity, and it made little impact in Berlin. On 4 December 1913 the Ottoman government officially announced the appointment of Liman von Sanders as the commander of the first army corps in Constantinople. The gauntlet had been thrown down, it now remained to see what Sazonov would do. He did not leave contemporaries in suspense for long. On 7 December the Russian Foreign Minister proposed a joint note, which the Entente would issue to the Sultan together, and which read as follows:

The fact that the command over the Turkish Army Corps in Constantinople has been entrusted to a German general would create for him a position which hitherto neither a German nor any other officer has ever occupied in Constantinople. As a result, the whole diplomatic Corps would be in the power of Germany. Besides, the German General would be in a position to take military measures which might call the sovereignty of the Sultan in question. The actual guarantee of the integrity of the Turkish Empire, which consists in the balance of Powers, would have vanished. Indeed, if Germany should obtain such a privileged position in Constantinople, the other Powers would be forced to safeguard their interests in Turkey.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Unfortunately for Sazonov, drafting this joint note was as far as he got. Sir Edward Grey seemed to have changed his mind on the potential danger of the mission once it was learned that Liman von Sanders would not have control over the Dardanelle Straits, only Constantinople itself. Much was made of the equivalent British command over the Turkish fleet, which in fact granted Britain powers exceeding those enjoyed by General Sanders. This, the British acknowledged, placed Sazonov in an awkward position. The Germans sensed this awkwardness, and took advantage by expressing their position in league with the British. Jagow advised his officials in Constantinople to intimate to their British counterparts there that Germany would no longer oppose any efforts to establish Turkish naval bases under British instruction – a bone of contention for Germany owing to the naval race. Further spin would be employed, to portray the Liman von Sanders mission and the pre-existing naval mission commanded by Britain as one and the same – policies aimed at preventing the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Only an expansionist power opposed to the repairing of its neighbour could possibly oppose it.

There was some truth to these ideas, and they met with a warn British reception. It seemed the one thing Britain and Germany could agree on was that the Ottoman Empire should be maintained, and that their individual missions should play a part in that task. Sazonov was thus stuck, and although the French advised that they would accept his identical note from 7 December, they asserted that it was not the right time to present it. Indeed, the French claimed that the British approach – where the Ottomans would be asked for the precise terms of Liman von Sanders’ command – was the correct one. Sazonov was also informed by his ambassador to London that Grey objected to any joint Entente demonstration against Germany which lacked the necessary contingencies. Benckendorff, the ambassador, wrote to Sazonov on 11 December as follows:

…step taken conjointly by three Powers would be so important an event and cause such a sensation that, quite apart from the text of the communication, the whole situation would be rendered most acute, without the three Powers having come to an understanding as to what their future attitude should be. For this reason, he insists that the first step should above all be an inquiry intended to learn the contents of the contract between the Turkish Government and the German General, so that the three Powers might, in this way, take account of the difference which would exist in the position of this general in the Turkish army… Grey believes that such an inquiry is in itself a serious matter and denotes a warning. According to the answer, the three Cabinets must then resolve what further action is to be taken. Only a Turkish answer could furnish the starting-point for further negotiation.[[27]](#footnote-27)

By jumping the gun and making threats without a fleshed-out plan, the Entente would cause more problems than it solved. And what of Germany? Could she truly be expected to back down in the face of threats? Sazonov was displeased with the paltry British proposal to merely inquire about Sander’s command. As he explained to Benckendorff in London:

This change in the attitude of England, in a question of much importance to us, affects us the more unpleasantly, since it is precisely we who have advised caution. The consequence is a very regrettable loss of time. The proposal of an identical action, of the three Powers in Constantinople, has also emanated from England. In regard to ourselves, we cannot assent to the new English proposal, for, to our mind, such an empty communication would be rather harmful than useful.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Sazonov continued to try and find an acceptable compromise – perhaps the answer lay after all in the British naval command at Constantinople. If Britain would assent to moving this command base to another Turkish city, would the Germans be persuaded to follow suit? This Grey again refused to accept, signalling that his support for Russia would only go so far when British interests were concerned. Sazonov, spurned by his Entente partners once again, did not mince words in a follow up telegram to Benckendorff on 12 December:

Should we finally be obliged to change our attitude in this question, as already in so many others, this is to be attributed only to the lack of confidence in the effectiveness of England's support, and, indeed, this confidence will only be shaken still more by such actions on the part of England. This lack of homogeneousness and solidarity between the three Powers of the Entente arouses our serious apprehension, for it constitutes an organic fault of the Triple Entente, which will always place us at a disadvantage in face of the firm block of the Triple Alliance. Such a condition of affairs might under certain circumstances entail grave consequences, and most seriously endangers the vital interests of every Power of the Triple Entente.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Sazonov thus continued to sound the alarm bells for the Entente, but his partners were no longer listening as they had. Liman von Sanders was judged to be not worth a crisis, and was it not good for the stability of the Balkans that the Turkish army was rebuilt and retrained? If Sazonov was destined to bang his head against a brick wall, there was at least no harm in loosening one of these bricks by restoring Entente solidarity, and proceeding with the inquiry after all. There followed an almost farcical scene where the ambassadors of the three powers presented a ‘questionnaire’ to the Grand Vizier on 13 December. Two key questions were raised – the independence of the Turks when commanded by a German, and the impact this would have on the Straits. The Vizier forcibly rejected these inquiries; it was the business of the Ottoman Empire alone what the terms of the Sanders Mission was. Zimmerman’s account of these meeting to the Kaiser saw the latter resume his famed habit for leaving comments in the margins. Where the Vizier refused to accept such inquiries, Wilhelm wrote ‘Bravo!’ in the margins. When the Vizier demanded that the ambassadors leave with him a copy of the questionnaire, Wilhelm remarked ‘Good!’ But when it was learned that the ambassadors, Russia’s chief among them, refused this request, Wilhelm wrote ‘Aha!’ When the Vizier exclaimed that the British enjoyed greater rights in their command over the Turkish fleet, Wilhelm wrote ‘Oh!’[[30]](#footnote-30)

The Vizier made much of his sense of outrage. It seemed to him, the British ambassador reported, that the Entente did not wish the Ottomans to undertake any reforms at all. And the Entente opposition was ludicrous. How could the British, in league with the Russians, claim that the Straits were under threat from the German command, when a British admiral commanded the Turkish fleet there? It was reported that the British ambassador laughed at this, as if acknowledging the inconsistency of the Russian approach. Nonetheless, in spite of the Vizier’s stance, he did inform the Russian ambassador in private that in the event of war, the Ottoman Minister of War, and not the Germans, would decide how the army was to be commanded. Sazonov seized upon this, urging his ambassador to press the British on their negotiations with Germany – was an Anglo-German understanding to compromise over their respective commands yet bearing fruit? Not so, according to Grey; these negotiations had ceased once it was discovered that the General Sanders had no authority over the Straits. Sazonov was enraged, accepting that the British suggestions for an inquiry had been a failure, and Russia was back to square one. If Entente solidarity had failed, Russia must take matters into her own hands.[[31]](#footnote-31)

On 14 December, Liman von Sanders finally took up his controversial command in Constantinople. Amidst the cheering crowds and ringing bells, Sanders was feted and honoured by Turkish officials. The Vizier expressed his gratitude that Germany had not buckled to Russian pressure, and impressed the necessity of military reforms upon him. His Mission proceeded in the teeth of Russian objections, and there may have been an element of satisfaction for the Vizier, who had withstood Russian pressure and weathered the storm. Yet, if the Vizier, or Grey, or the Germans believed that proceeding with the Mission would place a full stop on the controversy, they were to be sorely disappointed. Indeed, by mid-December the Liman von Sanders mission to Constantinople had become a crisis. Sazonov felt unable to back down, the Russian press continued to flame and rage, and the British were placed in the unenviable position of choosing between the two pillars of their foreign policy – these being, closer cooperation with the Entente, and a better understanding with Germany. Thus the last full calendar year of peace ended in a crisis, and in the next episode, we will resume this fascinating story.

1. Raymond Poincaré, ‘The Responsibility for the War,’ *Foreign Affairs*, 4, 1 (Oct., 1925), 1-19; 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, pp. 293-294. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid*, pp. 295-296. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid*, pp. 297-301. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid*, pp. 302-303. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid*, pp. 304-305. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. D. N. Collins, ‘The Franco-Russian Alliance and Russian Railways, 1891-1914,’ *Historical Journal*, 16, 4 (Dec., 1973), 777-788; 783. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Ibid*, 779-784. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibid*, 785-786. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid*, 787. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid*, 788. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Quoted in Robert J. Kerner, ‘The Mission of Liman von Sanders. I. Its Origin,’ *Slavonic Review*, 6, 16 (Jun., 1927), 12-27; 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Ibid*, 16-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Ibid*, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Quoted in *Ibid*, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Ibid*, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Robert J. Kerner, ‘The Mission of Liman von Sanders. II. The Crisis,’ *Slavonic Review*, 6, 17 (Dec., 1927), 344-363; 346. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, p. 339. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Kerner, ‘The Mission of Liman von Sanders. II. The Crisis,’ 350. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Ibid*, 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Ibid*, 352. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. 23 November 1913, Jagow to Wilhelm II in Mombauer, *Documents*, p. 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Kerner, ‘The Mission of Liman von Sanders. II. The Crisis,’ 356. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. 23 November 1913, O’Beirne to Grey in Mombauer, *Documents*, p. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Kerner, ‘The Mission of Liman von Sanders. II. The Crisis,’ 358. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Ibid*, 359-360. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Quoted in Robert J. Kerner, ‘The Mission of Liman Von Sanders. (III),’ *Slavonic and East European Review*, 6, 18 (Mar., 1928), 543-560; 546. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Ibid*, 547. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *Ibid*, 547-548. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *Ibid*, 549. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *Ibid*, 550-551. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)