

# From Berlin to Istanbul: The First Balkan Passengers of the Ottoman-German Alliance\*

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**Abstract:** At the beginning of World War I, the Ottoman Empire and Germany signed a secret alliance treaty, which obligated Germany to protect Ottoman territories. Although the Ottoman government initially declared neutrality, it had committed to joining the war on Germany's side once mobilization was complete. This necessitated strengthening the defence of strategic locations, particularly the Bosphorus and Dardanelles. At the same time, the Ottoman Navy had to be reinforced. In August 1914, to fortify the straits and navy, more than 500 German military and technical personnel, led by Admiral Guido von Usedom, were secretly transported to Istanbul via the Balkans. To avoid attracting attention, the journey was conducted under civilian disguise with careful planning. This operation marked the first major military deployment under the alliance and significantly increased German influence in Istanbul while the Ottoman Empire was still officially neutral. The article examines this journey through the accounts of German officers and archival documents.

**Keywords:** Ottoman, German Empire, World War I, Balkan journey, Straits.

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## Introduction

The secret treaty of alliance signed between the Ottoman Empire and the German Empire at the outbreak of the First World War obliged Germany to protect Ottoman territory. Although this treaty was secret and the Ottoman government initially declared its armed neutrality, it was promised to join the war on the side of Germany as soon as it completed its mobilisation preparations. This situation required the highest level of defence preparations against the Entente powers. The foremost preparation had to be made against threats to the capital. It was obvious that for the Ottoman Empire, joining the war on the side of Germany would mean that the Entente states would target the Dardanelles and Bosphorus straits, the two gateways to the capital Istanbul.

It was in such conjuncture that a special German unit was organised for the purpose of fortifying the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits and made its way to Istanbul via the Balkans in mid-August 1914. The main purpose here was to make the Straits ready for war within the framework of the war objectives of the secret alliance. Admiral Guido von Usedom was appointed as the head of the Special Command for Turkey, which was established within the German Imperial Navy upon requests from Istanbul, and more than five hundred German naval military and technical personnel under his command travelled to Istanbul by rail via the Balkans. However, this journey was not to be a conspicuous and military dispatch, but rather a civilian and clandestine one. Plans and assignments were made in advance to avoid problems on the route to Istanbul via Austria-Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. Despite the measures taken, problems encountered necessitated changes in the plans from time to time.

This voyage was important as it took place shortly after the signing of the secret treaty and was the first major shipment of military personnel within the framework of the alliance. It was also a development that increased German influence in Istanbul at a time when the Ottoman Empire was still neutral. In this study, the story of the journey that started from the shipyards of Northern Germany in the first weeks of the First World War and reached Istanbul via the Balkans will be discussed through the narratives of some German experts and officers who participated in the above-mentioned voyage and the reports reflected in the German archive.

Despite the close allied relationship between the two nations during World War I and the abundance of primary sources, the scarcity of research focusing on Germany's effectiveness within Ottoman headquarters and at the fronts has been the starting point of this study. Specifically, the rapid formation and deployment of the Special Command for Turkey to defend the Straits clearly demonstrates the significance Germany placed on the Ottoman Empire and the strategic importance of Straits in its World War I strategy. This special command directly contributed to the defence capacity of the Straits, playing a critical role in the success of its defence. This contribution can be observed during key periods, starting with the mobilization phase, particularly in the autumn of 1914, when the Ottoman Empire was preparing for war. It continued throughout 1915 when the Allied forces attempted to cross the Dardanelles, and in ensuring the security of the Straits region until 1918. This article aims to shed light on the early effectiveness of the German Imperial Navy in defending the Turkish Straits, an often-overlooked aspect of the Ottoman-German alliance.

### **Arbitration of the Straits: Special Command of the German Imperial Navy in Turkey [Sonderkommando der Kaiserliche Marine in der Türkei]**

The Bosphorus and the Dardanelles were strategic waterways leading to Istanbul, and their security was vital for protecting the capital of the Ottoman Empire in case of a naval attack. The loss of these straits could have led to the occupation of the Ottoman capital, Istanbul, and consequently to the withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire—Gerçes straits accelerated.

After the passage of the German battleships SMS Goeben and SMS Breslau, which would play a decisive role in the Ottoman entry into the war, through the Dardanelles on 10 August 1914 under the command of Admiral Wilhelm Anton Souchon (Souchon, 1921), the issue of the fortification of the Straits became an even more important agenda item. Two days after arriving in Istanbul on the battleship Goeben, Admiral Souchon, Commander of the German Mediterranean Division [Deutsche Mittelmeer-Division], held a meeting with Liman von Sanders, Head of the German Military Mission in Istanbul. Admiral Souchon was

de facto put in charge of the Ottoman Navy immediately after his arrival in Istanbul. In his meeting with Sanders, Souchon emphasized that the Dardanelles should be strengthened with all available means, that German naval officers and necessary personnel should be requested for this purpose, and that an effective wireless telegraph system should be established to monitor the Straits. Admiral Souchon aimed to establish an effective communication system between Berlin and the defence of the Straits by stationing German personnel in the Straits and in the large communications centre in Istanbul Okmeydanı (Yavuz, 2000: 145). According to the German Ambassador in Istanbul, Hans von Wangenheim, who reported to Berlin on 17 August 1914, Admiral Souchon had the authority to call for German officers or personnel for employment in the Ottoman Navy (PA AA, R 13320; BArch MA, RM 40/55: 5). In addition, Enver Pasha wrote to the Ministry of the Navy on 13 August that naval elements had been placed under Admiral Souchon's command and that his requests for materials and personnel should be fulfilled immediately, and this information was also conveyed to Souchon (BArch MA, RM 40/420: 140-141). The person who provided the communication between Admiral Souchon and the Minister of War Enver Pasha on these issues was the German Naval Attaché Hans Humann (BArch MA, RM 40/420: 136).

Admiral Souchon made plans as soon as he arrived in Istanbul and sent a telegram to Berlin on 15 August requesting naval officers, personnel and materials from Germany for coastal defence, navy and other necessary positions (Mäkelä, 1936: 129; Lorey, 1946: 3). The request for personnel and material, which Admiral Souchon in Istanbul personally conveyed to the German Emperor, was quickly responded to in Germany. In a short time, the Special Command of the German Imperial Navy in Turkey [Sonderkommando der Kaiserliche Marine in der Türkei] was organised under the command of Admiral Guido von Usedom. Retired Admiral Guido von Usedom, who was known to be close to the German Emperor, was personally preferred by Wilhelm II (BArch MA, RM 40/59: 16).

Thus, within the framework of the Ottoman-German secret military alliance dated August 2, 1914, one of the most important steps taken after the German warships in the Mediterranean (Goeben and Breslau) took refuge in Ottoman waters was the establishment of a special command unit aimed at fortifying the Straits. The main purpose of this newly established special command, which

was sent to Turkey, was to strengthen the coastal fortifications within the framework of the Turkish-German war goals, to make the defence of the Straits ready for war, and thus to create the basis for the Ottoman entry into the war. In the same way, another goal was to supplement the specialized navy personnel for the Ottoman Navy and to increase the offensive power of the navy (Janson, 1928: 64, 70; Lorey, 1946: 3; Hildebrand, 2000: 63).

## **Personnel Selection and Preparation Process for the Command**

Upon the request sent to Germany by Admiral Souchon, who was in Istanbul, correspondence was immediately started for the determination of personnel who would be assigned to the Ottoman Empire and the execution of the necessary procedures. For this purpose, a top-secret telegram sent from Istanbul on 15 August 1914 under the signature of Naval Captain [Richard] Ackermann, captain of the Goeben battleship on behalf of the Commander of the German Mediterranean Division, was submitted to the information of the Chief of Staff of the Imperial German Navy and the Minister of the Navy the next day. In this telegram, the demands of Admiral Souchon, Commander of the Mediterranean Division, for the defence of the Dardanelles and Istanbul Straits were expressed as two admirals for the command, 10 naval officers, as many artillery commanders, rangefinders, gunboat commanders, mine technicians and pointers. Admiral Souchon also requested 10 naval officers, 10 engineers, 30 gunsmiths, 10 torpedo masters, 10 pointers, 60 torpedo technicians and machine personnel to be assigned to Turkish warships and torpedo boats. Thus, the telegram stated that the British Naval Mission personnel, who had been active in the Ottoman Navy until then, would now be replaced by German officers, engineers and technicians (BArch MA, RM 40/55: 3). Efforts were started to send the requested personnel without delay, and information about the personnel planned to be sent to Turkey was forwarded to Admiral Souchon (Wolf, 2014: 86-87).

In those days, the selection of the first volunteers and the preparation process at the naval bases in the port cities in the north of Germany were remarkable. Then, with the participation of other troops, the journey, which started on June

20 and continued through Germany, Austria, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria to Istanbul, lasted about ten days. Memoirs and archive reports provide important information about both the selection of volunteers, the gathering in Berlin, and the long and adventurous journey that lasted ten days.

One of the sources providing information on this issue is a German naval non-commissioned officer named Erwin Bossert, who will later be stationed at the Orhaniye Bastion at the entrance to the Dardanelles Strait. Bossert gives interesting information about the assembly and preparation process of this special unit in his memoir. According to Bossert, on the afternoon of August 16, the entire marine artillery unit was called together in the barracks courtyard. In the courtyard, their commanders made a short speech and announced that a special volunteer corps would be established on behalf of the German Emperor. Those who would join this unit were not supposed to be married. According to the brief speech of their commander, this particular mission could have been quite boring, but it could also have been very, very interesting. Gunners, range-finders, specialists with mine training were wanted for heavy calibre and rapid-firing firearms. Only the most perfect candidates suitable for dispatch and administration could be considered. It was also promised that adequate assistance would be provided to the people left behind and dependents in case of death. According to Bossert, everyone who was there thought that this secret mission could be very interesting.

Before long, about 50 sailors from different ranks, including himself, stepped forward and signed up as volunteers. The volunteers' identity details were recorded, as well as the details of their relatives so that they could be notified in case of death and so that their civilian clothes and other belongings could be sent. So, they volunteered for a special mission, the location of which had not yet been announced, and they had nothing to do but prepare for it. The next day at 1 o'clock in the afternoon they assembled in the barracks yard. After a warm farewell speech by the commanding officer and congratulations from the friends left behind, they set off for Berlin, where they were to meet with volunteers from other Marine units. There they would also learn the details of the purpose of this special mission.

They stayed overnight at the deck officer school in Berlin, where they met their comrades from naval bases such as Wilhelmshaven, Cuxhaven, Wangeroog and Lehe. Thus, they formed a unit of about 400 men. In their conversations in the canteen of the deck officer school, they exchanged ideas about what purpose they would serve. There were different ideas about where and what kind of mission awaited them. Bossert wrote that no one thought about sleep that night; everyone's mind was on the loved ones they had left behind. Would they ever see them again? Early on the morning of 18 August they were taken to a gymnasium. There were racks on which thousands of new civilian clothes were hung. There were piles of hats, underwear and shoes on the floor. Naval Captain Meerschmidt Hüllessem then introduced himself as the leader of this special journey. Afterwards, there was no one left in the hall but the newly formed team and the doors were locked. There was a deathly silence, followed by the following announcement: 'His Majesty has chosen to send you through neutral countries to the Straits. This is the key to Turkey and we will defend it to the last man against any attack.' After the statement, if anyone thought that they could not fulfil this task, they were asked to come forward, but no one did so (Bossert, 1925: 9-11).

It is understood that the personnel designated to serve in the Ottoman Empire set off in groups by railway to converge at the main stations after the preparations were completed within a few days. The German Foreign Office informed Vienna about the continuation of this journey. A topsecret coded telegram dated 19 August 1914, signed by Arthur Zimmermann, Undersecretary of German Foreign Affairs, was sent to the Embassy in Vienna (BArch MA, RM 40/55: 10). In the telegram, it was reported that approximately 600 German officers, engineers and shipyard workers would be travelling to Istanbul via Oderberg, Budapest, Romania and Bulgaria to be assigned to Goeben, Breslau and Turkish ships, and that the first group of 85 people would depart early the next morning. According to the information given, the personnel would present themselves as technicians and labourers, would be dressed in civilian clothes and would carry only personal needs and foodstuffs. In the letter, it was requested that the German personnel in question be provided with effortless and duty-free passage. It was also requested that the train and customs personnel be kept in the strictest secrecy and be instructed to act accordingly. In the handwritten draft

in the continuation of the same file, the names of 26 senior officers, 10 staff officers, 169 non-commissioned officers, 253 sailors and 89 sailors for the Breslau are given (BArch MA, RM 40/55: 22-23).

On the other hand, according to the information received from the German Ambassador to Romania [Julius von] Waldthausen, it was stated that the shipments to be made should be carried out very quickly due to the increase in espionage activities in Romania. Especially in Bucharest, it was advised to continue on the road without delay and the personnel should be advised not to talk among themselves or with strangers (BArch MA, RM 40/55: 9).

During this preparatory process, a directive was also drawn up regarding the status of the soldiers and personnel of the German Navy who were newly sent to Turkey and those who were already there. According to the directive dated 19 August 1914 and signed by [Eduard von] Capelle, Deputy Minister of the Imperial Navy (BArch MA, RM 40/55: 11), naval personnel, both those sent to the Ottoman Empire on special missions and those who were there voluntarily, were to remain active members of the Imperial German Navy and German citizens. If the course of the war also necessitated his enlistment in Turkish service, the Emperor's approval was required. In such a case, their military or citizenship ties with Germany would remain intact. In addition, it was stated that their salaries would be paid according to their ranks, and that the German Navy would undertake this if the Turkish government could not afford it. Even if there was a problem in Turkey and a claim was made, the rights of both the personnel and those they left behind would be regulated according to German law.

At the same time, Admiral Guido von Usedom was informed of the details of the task he was to undertake as head of the Special Command for Turkey. In a secret letter dated 20 August 1914, signed by von Capelle, Deputy Minister of the Imperial Navy, and sent to Admiral Usedom, it was stated that he had been assigned the task of delivering reinforcements to the German Mediterranean Fleet in Istanbul on the occasion of his appointment as the head of the Special Command. According to the information given in the letter, these reinforcements were to be travelled from Berlin to Budapest by special trains prepared by the German and Austrian General Staffs, and their necessary needs such as food etc. were to



be met at the stations. No difficulties were expected at the Austrian frontier. In Budapest, the German Naval Attaché, Naval Major Baron von Freyberg, would wait for them and take care of the continuation of the shipment. He was given instructions to continue the shipment through Romania and Bulgaria. All weapons and uniforms were to be left in Budapest first and sent later. During the transport through Romania and Bulgaria, nothing was to attract attention and secrecy was to be maintained at the highest level. Personnel were forbidden to converse with strangers. The manner in which the shipment from Budapest was to proceed was left to the discretion of Admiral Usedom and the ambassador. German representatives in Romania and Bulgaria, still neutral, were informed that the shipment would be in transit. Their help would only be forthcoming in cases of extreme urgency. The troops were to take enough food with them to get through these two countries. Finally, Admiral Usedom was told that he could charge the expenses necessary to fulfil this mission to the Imperial account (BArch MA, RM 40/55: 13-14). Thus, Admiral Usedom would be the head of this special command between 19 August 1914 and 2 November 1918, in other words, from its formation shortly after the signing of the Ottoman-German Alliance until its dissolution in the days following the signing of the Armistice of Mudros (Altıntaş, 2023, 2024b: 183; Hildebrand, 2000: 63).

## **An Extraordinary Journey from Northern Germany to Istanbul**

The records indicate that upon the request sent from Istanbul to Berlin, work started immediately on determining the German personnel to serve in the Ottoman Empire. For this purpose, intensive preparations took place in the northern German port cities of Kiel and Wilhelmshaven between 15-20 August 1914. In addition, the possibility of encountering some difficulties on the route of the journey was quite high. As a matter of fact, the attitude of Romania in the first weeks of the war required special precautionary measures to be taken in order to avoid difficulties during the passage of the shipment. Therefore, all personnel had to travel in civilian clothes. All volunteers enrolled in the unit had to appear as shipyard labourers and officers as civil servants. The part of the personnel

shipment from Kiel and Wilhelmshaven arrived in Berlin on 21 August 1914 (BArch MA, RM 40/59: 16).

Medical Captain Wilhelm Rosenberger, who was among the personnel who served in Turkey, like artillery non-commissioned officer Erwin Bossert, also provided information about this journey in his report (BArch MA, RM 40/55: 34-39). Dr Rosenberger also provided information about this voyage and his duties in the medical field in the Straits Command in an article he wrote in the following years (Rosenberger, 1935: 89-91). According to Rosenberger's account in his report, the train carrying the first 150 personnel designated for the special command departed Kiel at 6.55 a.m. on 20 August and arrived at Berlin's central railway station (Lehrter Bahnhof) at night. Approximately 80 personnel from Wilhelmshaven had already arrived in Berlin. The members of the special unit spent the night in the barracks of the 2nd Guards Regiment in Berlin. The entire contingent departed for Turkey on 21 August on their allocated trains. The officer in charge of the party was Naval Captain Meerscheidt Hüllessem. The medical staff consisted of Navy doctor Wilhelm Rosenberger, assistant doctor Zacharias-Langhans and two paramedics. Since the journey had to be made through neutral countries, the officers and men were dressed as civilians. They had to identify themselves as engineers, assemblers and factory workers. All non-commissioned officers and enlisted men wore civilian suits, shirts and hats. The military uniforms and other belongings were packed in cartons and travelled in luggage to Budapest. However, these items had to be left there to be sent back after a while. Rosenberger wrote that these items only reached their owners in October and were subjected to numerous thefts (BArch MA, RM 40/55: 34).

A list of the German naval officers involved in the shipment and a table on the number of low-ranking military personnel is included in the archive report. Accordingly, 26 officers and enlisted personnel, including the commander, are listed below (BArch MA, RM 40/59: 16-17, 20).

**List of officers involved in the expedition:**

1. Vice Admiral z. D.<sup>1</sup> Merten
2. Captain (Navy) z. D. von Kühlwetter
3. Captain (Navy) Baron von Meerscheid-Hüllessen
4. Lieutenant Commander Wossidlo
5. Lieutenant Commander E. von Müller
6. Lieutenant Commander Baron von Kottwitz
7. Captain Second Lieutenant von Janson
8. Captain Second Lieutenant Conn
9. Captain Second Lieutenant Firle
10. Captain Second Lieutenant Baron von Fircks
11. First Lieutenant at Sea z. D. Boltz
12. First Lieutenant at Sea Frege
13. First Lieutenant at Sea Raydt
14. First Lieutenant d. R. M. A.<sup>2</sup> Herschel
15. First Lieutenant d. R. M. A. Koritzi
16. Second Lieutenant to Sea Woermann
17. Second Lieutenant to Sea von Wurmb
18. Second Lieutenant d. R. M. A. Natz
19. Navy Staff Engineer z. D. Zimmermann
20. Navy Senior Engineer Berndt
21. Navy Senior Engineer Candidate Reeder
22. Navy Senior Engineer Candidate Schmidt
23. Navy Staff Physician (of the Reserve) Dr Rosenberger
24. Navy Assistant Physician (of the Reserve) Zacharias Langhaus
25. Navy Staff Paymaster, Danz.

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1 The German military term “zur Disposition” (z. D.) means “retired” or “in reserve”. This term is often used to indicate that an officer has retired from active service or is in the reserve.

2 “d. R. M. A.” stands for “der Reserve-Marineartillerie,” which in English can be expressed as “**of the Reserve Naval Artillery.**”

Low-ranking naval personnel				
		Deck officer	Non-commissioned officer	Enlisted personnel
Seaman divisions		-	27	31
Torpedo divisions	seamen	-	13	9
	technical	7	42	49
Dockyard divisions		3	7	2
Artillery detachments		-	80	162
	=	10	169	253
Total 432				
Officers 26				
Total number of personnel 458				

According to Rosenberger's report, officers and non-commissioned officers/enlisted personnel travelled in separate wagons determined by their rank during the journey. While the officers could move between the wagons and make use of the dining car, the enlisted personnel had to travel in a third-class wagon. There was no side corridor and there was no possibility to pass between the wagons if necessary. Perhaps partly for this reason, the train had to stop a lot. Each compartment in the carriages accommodated six to eight people, with two hammocks hanging from the ceiling and beds on the seats. But because of the lack of space, they had to take it in turns to lie down. Each person was given a blanket to cover themselves with. The equipment also included plates, glasses, forks, spoons, knives and handkerchiefs. Each carriage had a water bucket and a broom for cleaning the carriage (BArch MA, RM 40/55: 34-35).

While in German territory and travelling through Austria-Hungary, the soldiers' needs were well catered for at the railway stations. At the same time, the soldiers were increasingly given gifts at each station, which they could enjoy. As they travelled further south from Hungary, the gypsy music became more and more extravagant. Although it was carried out in civilian clothes and secret, there were people waiting for the train at the stations with slogans such as 'Greater Germany'. This shipment must have been heard. These people brought alcohol,

cigarettes, food, and fruit with them and offered them to the passengers on the train. Although they were all well-intentioned, these gifts had negative health consequences such as illness or diarrhoea. In his writings, Dr Rosenberger frequently evaluated the developments on this journey from the point of view of the medical profession. He also provided information on the health status of soldiers and officers, diseases during the journey, vaccination and health facilities (BArch MA, RM 40/55: 35).

After a two-day journey with frequent stops, Budapest was reached. They stayed here for a while so that the non-commissioned officers and enlisted men could eat, sleep and rest properly, at least for one night, in the nearby buildings such as schools and power stations. Here, the team grew even larger with the inclusion of 1 officer and 89 enlisted men who were planned to serve on the battleship Breslau. With their addition, the departure from Budapest continued at noon on 24 August (BArch MA, RM 40/55: 36; BArch MA, RM 40/59: 20). When this figure is included in the table above, the number exceeds five hundred.

Meanwhile, after arriving in Budapest at 17.30 on 23 August, the continuation of the shipment was discussed with the German Consul General Count Fürstenberg and the Naval Attaché Captain Baron von Freyberg. The shipment had to be carried out unobtrusively through Romania and Bulgaria. A decision had to be made as to whether the shipment should be carried out all at once or in portions, as assumed by the German Foreign Office. The leader of the shipment was authorised to do so, and it was decided to continue the journey in its entirety, as it was considered that repeated transports might attract more attention than single transports. At the same time, it was decided to load the uniforms and weapons into the baggage wagons of the next scheduled train, without waiting for the mine transport, once the shipment was under way (BArch MA, RM 40/59: 16-17).

According to the information given from the Vienna Embassy to the Foreign Ministry in Istanbul on 25 August; 546 people, including two admirals, 27 officers, 517 junior officers and enlisted personnel, had been shipped from Pest to Romania by a special train the previous day. Although it was understood that a second group of personnel was on its way from Germany, no definite information had yet been received about their number (BOA. HR. SYS, 2392/1, 11).

Everything had to be as secret as possible in order to make the shipment as inconspicuous as possible. In fact, this point is emphasised in the section where German petty officer Erwin Bossert described the process after arriving in Berlin. As a matter of fact, according to his account, the journey was planned by private trains through Romania and Bulgaria with fake passports to work as labourers on the Baghdad Railway. They would address their commanders as Mr. Foreman. If they encountered a problem, they had to try to reach Istanbul in groups of two or three by taking care of themselves. Though such a negative situation, the officer in charge of the party, who hoped that they would meet in Istanbul in a complete way, also asked that this secret mission be kept secret even from relatives. He suggested that, if possible, they should take good pocket-sized pistols and good knives with them secretly. Soon everyone was impeccably dressed from head to toe in new civilian clothes. However, although everyone was dressed in civilian clothes, different hats were provided according to ranks so that their military rank could be easily determined. According to Bossert's account, they had gone in groups of three or four to the Stettin (Berlin North) Station, where an empty train was waiting, in order not to attract attention and avoid unnecessary questions. There were enough blankets and hammocks in each wagon, as well as enough food. This small space was supposed to be a shelter for them for perhaps 14 days in terribly cramped conditions. Uniforms, rifles and pistols were to arrive in a special supply wagon wrapped in tarpaulin. Quickly everyone settled down; postcards were written to those who were left behind, and the train set off for "an uncertain future" (Bossert, 1925: 11-12).

Without long breaks through Breslau and Oderberg, they reached the Romanian border via Austria, Hungary. Bossert noted that all the German naval personnel who participated in this shipment would never forget how warmly and enthusiastically their allies welcomed them during the trip. Apparently, the news was spreading from station to station that a train carrying German navy personnel was on its way. There were plenty of treats at all the train stations. The train stations were full of people who wanted to greet the German navy personnel. These people were constantly handing flags in the national colors of Austria and Hungary to German naval personnel. The train had to stop at the smallest

stations on the Hungarian plain in the middle of the night. Because the locals insisted on greeting the German special mission unit and providing treats. A brewery in Timisoara had sent a truck full of beer barrels for this special unit. The officer in charge sometimes allowed the personnel to go out. They arrived at the Romanian border on the evening of August 25. Of course, it was not allowed to leave the train in the border area. They had witnessed from the windows of the train how the officer in charge of the party tried to negotiate with a Romanian police officer in the Romanian station chief's office and handed over long rows of German gold coins on the table. However, otherwise it might not have been possible to continue from this station (Bossert, 1925: 12-13).

On the other hand, while the wagons were viewed with suspicion by the people walking around the railway station, the unrest increased even more when a train with Russian reserve soldiers arrived on the neighbouring tracks. The Russians instinctively began to sense their enemies on the train and menacing challenges appeared. Bossert wrote that in such a tense environment, they were waiting behind the windows, ready for the worst-case scenario, alert with their weapons in an appropriate way to deal with the Russians. Then the officer in charge jumped on the locomotive and the train started moving quickly. In this way, it was possible to get away from the dangerous environment that could turn into a conflict (Bossert, 1925: 12-13).

According to Rosenberger's report, Kronstadt (Braşov-Romania) was reached on August 26. According to the report, due to secrecy, the train caravan was divided into two and separate routes were followed by crossing the Romanian border in this way in the evening. By morning, the Danube had been reached from the territory of Romania and Ruse had been crossed. Here, a meal was eaten with a stopover at a German-run hotel. After that, the meals on the journey would be taken care of on the train and with the bread, cheese, salami etc. that everyone took with them. Previously, the adjustment of the passenger car from Ruse was neglected, so the journey continued towards noon with groups of 15 people with freight cars. Sofia was reached only at night and the party spent the night in freight cars.

Rosenberger, through the eyes of a doctor, mentioned that after crossing the Danube, the fight against various insects, which were a *sine qua non* of the Balkans and the East, began. In addition, in the Bulgarian countryside, where there were few trees, the August heat was showing itself and the journey in the wagons was becoming unbearable. Almost all of the soldiers were overwhelmed and climbed on top of the wagons. It was all covered in dust, dirt, rust. The fact that the train once broke down by the side of a stream was seen as an opportunity to get into the water by all the officers and enlisted personnel. Rosenberger mentioned that the differences in rank, which were already difficult to understand in civilian dress, have completely disappeared when everyone undressed. However, on August 28, while continuing on the Turkish territory, there was an unfortunate incident which resulted in the death of a soldier near Uzunköprü. While most of the soldiers sought refuge on the roof of the train from the heat and were enjoying themselves, one of them tripped on the telegraph wires, lost his balance, and fell between two wagons. He was fatally injured and then died. After the body was placed in an empty section, it was delivered to SMS Goeben (Yavuz) the next day (Barch MA, RM 40/55: 38-38). The soldier who died as a result of this accident must have been Karl Szernik from the navy personnel of the German battleship Breslau (then Midilli) (Wolf, 2008: 223).

Bossert also mentioned in his memoirs the journey they made through Plovdiv on Bulgarian territory and the unbearable heat he experienced while traveling in freight wagons. He also mentioned about the traces of the bloody Balkan War on the Lüleburgaz and Çatalca lines that the huge piles of soil on this battlefield point to mass graves where about five thousand Turkish soldiers lost their lives due to extraordinary efforts, starvation and exhaustion (Bossert, 1925: 13-14).

## **Arrival in Istanbul and Distribution of Duties of German Military Personnel**

Hans Humann, the German Naval Attaché, pointed out the issues that should be taken into account when the party reached Turkish territory after negotiations with the Minister of War Enver Pasha. On the one hand, the party that came from Germany and the one already on its way should have reached its destination safely, but on the other hand, German personnel should not have entered



the centre of Istanbul in the first place in accordance with Ottoman military interests. For this reason, when it was reported that the train was approaching, it was planned to stop at the Zeytinlik military station between San Stefano (Yeşilköy) and Bakırköy as an exception. The German personnel expected to arrive should have been considered as workers who would work at the gunpowder factory in Zeytinlik hired by the Turkish government. The station commander was to accompany the “workers” on their passage to the ready-waiting steamer. This practice was applicable to the enlisted men rather than officers. Humann, in his telegram dated August 25, 1914, wanted the staff to be informed about the issue through an officer, but also to pay attention to the possibility of enemy agents. When the entrance was made from Edirne, he requested that Chief Aide to the Minister of War Kazim Bey [Orbay] be informed by telegram in order to make the necessary preparations in Zeytinlik (TTK Archive, KO, 21, 82, 82; BArch MA, RM 40/59, p. 21). Admiral Usedom later wrote in his report that although the borders of Turkey had been entered, contrary to his expectations, he was disappointed by this kind of secrecy. Because in fact, he expressed that he expected a great welcome for the allied friends who were being awaited with excitement (BArch MA, RM 40/1: 3).

The date of 25 German officers and 520 naval personnel who sailed from Germany under the command of Admiral Usedom reached Istanbul via the neutral Balkan states Romania and Bulgaria was August 29, 1914. After arriving in Istanbul, the navy personnel to be assigned to the Ottoman Navy and the personnel to take some administrative duties were separated, and the remaining 15 naval officers and 281 naval soldiers and personnel were placed under the command of this special command, which was established to support the defence of the Straits. By dividing into two, the number of these command personnel assigned to Istanbul and the Dardanelles straits would increase to close to 700 in a short time. Admiral von Usedom would be appointed as the top officer of the coastal defence of Bosphorus and the Dardanelles Straits, with the headquarters being in Istanbul (Wallach, 1985: 139; Lorey, 1946: 6; Feldmann, 1939: 642-643; Mühlmann, 1940: 19; Wolf, 2014: 91-92).

According to the account of Medical Captain Rosenberger, who was among the personnel from Germany, the Turkish border was reached on the evening of August 28. August 29th, after a night journey, the train arrived at Bakırköy station on the Marmara coast between San Stefano (Yeşilköy) and Istanbul in the early morning hours. Then the German Naval Unit boarded the ferry named General, which had been anchored on the shore. The Goeben (Yavuz) and Breslau (Midilli) battleships appeared to be anchored on the side of Istanbul's (Prince's) Islands in the distance. In the afternoon, they entered the Bosphorus on board the General and sailed to Tarabya. After being informed about the duties of the troops, the troops assigned to the Bosphorus passed to the deck of the steamer SMS Corcovado there. In the evening, as the sun was setting, they went out to the Marmara Sea again. After dark, Breslau berthed and picked up the navy personnel designated for her, and then the journey continued from there to the Dardanelles. Thus, 10 days after the departure from Berlin, the journey had reached its final destination in Istanbul and the Dardanelles (Barch MA, RM 40/55: 37).

According to the German petty officer Bossert, he got off the train at the station on the morning of August 29 and boarded the General that was anchored in the harbour, within two hours. After a little rest, the personnel were called to the deck and the distribution of duties was made in accordance with their training. Signal personnel, light ship gunners for Goeben and Breslau, artillery personnel for the Bosphorus had been designated. A mine unit was formed to search for and locate mines in the straits. Bossert stated that this was the most dangerous and difficult job. He, along with 160 friends, was assigned to the team that would serve in the Çanakkale artillery batteries, and this team stayed on the ship after the other groups had left. The ship anchored at midnight and arrived at Kilitbahir in the Dardanelles Strait on the morning of August 30 (Bossert, 1925: 14-15).

Admiral Usedom, together with Admiral Souchon, made his first inspection of the Istanbul Strait fortifications on August 30. Then he informed Enver Pasha about the framework of the mission he received from the German Emperor Wilhelm II during their meeting the next day. According to this, he would perform the task of strengthening the fortifications of the Dardanelles and Istanbul

Straits and training the personnel stationed there. At this meeting, in which Naval Attaché Major Humann was also present, the form of duty of the special command was determined. Since the Turkish coastal defence was connected to the army, the personnel of the Imperial German Navy Special Command would be assigned to the army command and wear the army uniform, they would have a senior rank like in the military delegation. However, even though they wore Ottoman uniforms, the inner workings of the special command would continue in the hands of the Germans, and even the pensions would be given according to the German rank (BArch MA, RM 40/59: 22); (Lorey, 1946: 7). Admiral Usedom stated that this meeting, which took place at Enver Pasha's house where he was resting due to a small medical operation, was binding within the framework of command relations, but he mentioned that he got the impression during the meeting that they were not very welcome (BArch MA, RM 40/1: 4).

It was seen that when the German naval officers and personnel reached Istanbul, the distribution of duties was made within an inspectorate responsible for the defence of the Bosphorus acting on orders of the Ottoman General Headquarters. Accordingly, as previously planned, Admiral Guido von Usedom would be responsible for the Straits and would be the inspector in charge of strengthening the fortifications in the Straits. German naval officers and gunners were to be distributed to bastions and posts in the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits and to begin training and fortification works. Vice Admiral Johannes Merten was to be the representative of the General Headquarters of the Ottoman Commander-in-Chief for the Dardanelles Strait. On the other hand, Admiral Wilhelm Souchon, who had previously come to Istanbul, was responsible for making the Ottoman Navy ready for war with personnel who came from Germany as reinforcements (Mühlmann, 1940: 19; Schneider, 1925: 12; Wolf, 2014: 91-92).

Vice Admiral Merten, who was appointed as the representative of the General Headquarters for the Dardanelles Strait, departed from Istanbul to Canakkale on August 29 on board the General with 7 officers and 165 navy personnel. Naval Captain [Friedrich von] Kühlwetter was also assigned to the Bosphorus in Istanbul with 5 officers and 98 navy personnel. Admiral Usedom, on the other hand, anchored in front of the German Embassy summer house in Tarabya with the

SMS Corcovado steamer and established his headquarters here. Thus, he would be in constant contact with the embassy (Lorey, 1946: 10). The special command report indicated 5 officers and 68 navy personnel for the Bosphorus, and for the Dardanelles, it indicated 8 officers and 160 navy personnel (BArch MA, RM 40/59: 21-22). The information provided by Admiral Usedom was in the form of 8 Officers, including Vice Admiral Merten, 100 Non-Commissioned Officers and the rest were enlisted personnel (BArch MA, RM 40/1: 4).

In the Imperial Navy documents in the German military archive, there are summary lists of German officers and personnel assigned to the defence of the Dardanelles and Bosphorus straits. A review of the list of German officers assigned to the command positions in the Straits under the general inspectorate shows that there are 20 officers listed by name including those mentioned above (BArch MA, RM 40/55: 40). In another list, information is provided about the distribution of command personnel to the chief of staff of the inspectorate and to the two straits. When looking at those who were assigned to the Dardanelles, Admiral Merten, the Commander-in-Chief Delegate, and German officers such as [Fritz] Wossidlo, [Wilhelm] Rosenberger, [Heinrich] Herschel, [Konrad] Frege, [Hans] Woermann, [Emil] Natz are included in the list. In addition, there is information that about 160 artillery petty officers, naval gunners, technical and training personnel were assigned (BArch MA, RM 40/55: 42).

## Conclusion

In this study, the journey of the special German naval unit, which was established to strengthen the Ottoman Navy and the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, to Istanbul via the Balkans in mid-August 1914, was examined. The main purpose of the Turkish Special Command, created within the Imperial German Navy and containing more than five hundred German naval military and technical personnel, was to make the Straits and the Ottoman Navy ready for war within the framework of the secret alliance's war goals. This unit had made its way to Istanbul by rail through the Balkans with more than five hundred members during the tense days when the First World War began. The importance of

this trip lies in the fact that it took place shortly after the signing of the secret military alliance treaty between the two states and that it was the first major shipment of military personnel within the framework of the alliance.

On the other hand, the arrival of this unit in Istanbul increased the German presence and activity in the capital during the first months of the war, when the Ottoman Empire was still neutral. At the same time, it was an important and triggering development in the process leading to the actual involvement of the Ottoman Empire in the war on the side of Germany. Bosphorus and the Dardanelles Straits were critical for the Ottoman Empire and represented strategic points for Germany within the framework of the signed alliance. When the Turkish Special Command was being created, the personnel selected for the special mission were told, "His Majesty has chosen you to send to the Straits through neutral countries. This is the lock of Turkey and we will defend this place to the last man against possible attacks ...". This statement reveals the Straits' importance.

The narratives of some German experts and officers who participated in this journey and the reports reflected in the German archive provide remarkable information about the story of the journey that started from the North German shipyards and reached Istanbul through the Balkans. First of all, the efforts of this special German unit, which is on its way to Istanbul, through diplomatic missions to ensure a smooth journey and duty-free passage are noteworthy. In addition, when looking at the narratives, it becomes clear that this shipment, planned to be made in great secrecy, was actually overheard and continued its way among people's gifts and songs in a war propaganda environment, and even narrowly avoided conflict with Russian reserve troops in the first weeks of the war. It is seen that great importance is attached to this journey, especially to the smooth crossing of Romania. Because from the very first weeks of the war, Romania's attitude required special precautionary measures to avoid difficulties during the passage of the shipment.

Of course, for the Ottoman-German alliance to be meaningful, the establishment of a physical connection between the territories of the two allied states was a prerequisite from the very beginning. From this point of view, in the later months of the war, the Balkans became a great obstacle that had to be overcome, and a lock that had to be broken at the point where it could not be overcome. It

would take until the autumn of 1915 for this lock to be broken and for a transport connection between Berlin and Istanbul to be established. As a matter of fact, it was only after Bulgaria joined the alliance and the military operation against Serbia was organized that it was possible to establish a rail connection between Berlin and Istanbul (Altıntaş, 2024a: 126).

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