

I The Vision

We must not forget that everything taking place in a Mohammedan country sends waves across the entire world of Islam.

Baron Max Oppenheim

I

The Kaiser, the Baron and the Dragoman

*Pour chasser les démons, il faudrait un prophète.*¹

King Louis Philippe to François Guizot

As the *Hohenzollern* passed through the Dardanelles en route for Constantinople in the first week of November in 1889, an astonishing spectacle greeted its distinguished passengers, all crammed onto the outer decks. 'From Settl-Bahar and Kum-Kaleh to Abydos,' wrote an English journalist observing from the shore, 'all the forts hoisted the German flag, the military bands played the German anthem, and as the Imperial yacht passed between the castles where the straits are narrowest the forts on either side thundered forth their welcome in a salute of 101 guns.' After docking at the Golden Horn, the German royal party was received with elaborate ceremony by Sultan Abdul Hamid II at the imperial palace of Yıldız: official visits to the even grander Dolmabahçe and Beylerbey palaces would follow. A particular highlight was a tour of the Bosphorus aboard elegant Ottoman court caiques, each one 'rowed by ten pairs of oars'. So warm was the Sultan's reception, so beguiling the oriental sights on display, that the German delegation extended its official visit to four full days filled with pomp and panoply.²

It was a heady experience for young Kaiser Wilhelm II. Having ascended to the German throne the previous year, his thirtieth, the Kaiser was anxious to make a name for himself and emerge from the shadow of Germany's long-serving Chancellor, Prince Otto von Bismarck. The state visit to Constantinople accomplished both tricks at once, not least because Bismarck had made clear his stout opposition

to the trip, for fear of offending Russia to no good purpose. Ever since the unification of Germany under Prussian leadership in 1871, Bismarck had been content to consolidate the boundaries of the new German empire, trying to avoid unnecessary foreign adventures at all costs. Bismarck's famous remark about the Balkans not being 'worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier' is in fact a misquote: what he actually said was that 'the whole Orient' – meaning the entire Ottoman Empire – should not be a concern of Germany's foreign policy.³ Although Bismarck did support the spread of German influence in Turkey, personally approving the dispatch of a German military mission led by Generalmajor Otto Kaehler on Abdul Hamid's request in 1883, he did so as quietly as possible, for fear of ruining Germany's fragile relations with Russia, which viewed the Straits at Constantinople with greedy eyes.⁴ In 1887, Bismarck had tried to counter Russian suspicions with his 'Reinsurance Treaty', in which Russia and Germany pledged to remain neutral in wars with third countries (including Ottoman Turkey).[†] And now here was the Kaiser making an unprecedented state visit to the Sultan, confirming the Russians' worst fears about German intentions in the Near East.

What was a diplomatic nightmare for Bismarck, however, was for the young Kaiser very good fun. Wilhelm was fêted everywhere he went in Constantinople, even by the English colony, which took him in as one of their own (he was, after all, the grandson of Queen Victoria). Aside from the salutes and cannonades, there was enough political intrigue in four days to fill a book. Addressing his German counterpart, in accordance with Islamic tradition, through a pair of interpreters (despite knowing French perfectly well), Sultan Abdul Hamid took the impressionable young Kaiser into his confidence, complaining of palace plots, unflattering embassy gossip and, more pointedly, the designs of other European sovereigns on his domains. Because Germany had not, as of yet, displayed similar territorial ambitions, Wilhelm remembered the Sultan telling him, with an air of conspiracy, that

* After Kaehler's death in 1885 the mission was headed by Lieutenant Colonel Freiherr von der Goltz, with whose name the pre-war initiative is usually associated.

† A secret clause spelled out that Germany would remain neutral in the event of Russian naval intervention in the Bosphorus or the Straits.

‘my visit would make these powers very nervous’. This was music to the ears of an ambitious young Emperor keen to make his mark on the world.⁵

In the young Kaiser’s ostentatious state visit to Constantinople in 1889, we can see those qualities which would soon both fascinate and repel the world. On the one hand, it is easy to see why the visit was so well received. Wilhelm’s childlike curiosity and capacity for wonder, his ability to be fascinated by new sights and sensations, from the Ottoman caiques and palaces to the ‘gracious, delightful, rhythmic dances of the Circassians’ in the Sultan’s *harem*: all this went over very well with Constantinople’s residents. An ancient caravan people known for their hospitality to travellers, Turks have always responded well to visitors’ attentions and compliments. Kaiser Wilhelm did not disappoint them, thanking the Sultan effusively for his ‘splendid hospitality’ and declaring himself ‘much moved by the feelings of cordiality and sympathy shown towards their Majesties both by the Sovereign of Turkey and his subjects’. The Kaiser then gave the Sultan’s Grand Vizier a diamond-set Prussian Order of the Eagle.⁶

The flip side to the flattery on display during the Kaiser’s state visit was Wilhelm’s vanity and insecurity, his need to be the centre of attention, which has been remarked on by nearly all of his biographers. Born in the breech position after an agonizing ten-hour delivery which his mother barely survived, the future Kaiser suffered nerve damage that crippled his left arm, which by adulthood was six inches shorter than the right and essentially useless. As a result of his deformity, Wilhelm could not even cut his own meat without help, let alone handle weapons like the soldier he always wanted to be. The young Kaiser had thus grown up with a very large chip on his shoulder, a sense that he had always to prove himself and win acclaim. Kaiser Wilhelm, it was said, had to be ‘the stag at every hunt, the bride at every wedding, and the corpse at every funeral’. This was not a man likely to resist the lure of oriental gifts and blandishments.⁷

The trip to Constantinople also highlighted Wilhelm’s reckless sense of statecraft, born of his restless, unbalanced character. Able to muster up sudden enthusiasms on a moment’s notice, Wilhelm yet lacked the ability to focus on essentials, or note contradictions. It is of more than passing historical interest, for example, that the Kaiser

befriended not only the soon-to-be-notorious 'Bloody Sultan' on this inaugural visit to the Ottoman capital, but also Theodor Herzl, the Viennese journalist usually considered the father of Zionism. Converted by Herzl, with astonishing swiftness, to the Zionist cause, the Kaiser promptly lobbied Sultan Abdul Hamid on Herzl's behalf. It does not seem to have occurred to young Wilhelm that the Sultan's Muslim subjects may not have viewed the prospect of further Jewish settlement in Palestine favourably, or that the Sultan-Caliph of Sunni Islam might have resented this officious intervention in Ottoman religious affairs. Nor does the Kaiser seem to have given much thought to how, exactly, this meddling served the German national interest. For Bismarck's cool and careful indifference to the Orient, the Kaiser had now substituted the emotional improvisations of amateur hour. The Eastern Question would never be the same again.⁸

The Kaiser, to be sure, did not follow up directly on his overtures to either the Sultan or the Zionists: his attention, characteristically, wandered elsewhere soon after returning home from Constantinople. Still, Wilhelm's 1889 trip was a harbinger of things to come. The ageing Bismarck was pushed out of office in March 1890, ostensibly because his reactionary predilections were out of step with the more progressive Reichstag elected that year: but the Kaiser was equally keen on breaking the Iron Chancellor's hold on foreign policy. Within weeks of Bismarck's fall, the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia was allowed to lapse, despite open Russian overtures in Berlin in favour of renewal. A natural alliance between the two reactionary powers had been replaced, perhaps quite needlessly, by an antagonism which would dominate two world wars. Not only did the lapse open the door for France's courting of a defensive alliance with Russia (concluded in 1894), it also put the Tsar's diplomats on notice that the Germans would no longer acquiesce in Russian designs on the Straits. Had the Kaiser made an effort to renew Bismarck's Reinsurance Treaty, it is possible the Russian government would have ignored the Kaiser's flirtations with the Ottoman Sultan, and refrained from rushing headlong into French arms for fear of an out-of-control Germany. Instead, Wilhelm's state visit to Constantinople, followed by the expiration of the Reinsurance Treaty, confirmed the Russians' worst fears about German intentions at the Porte, with momentous consequences for the European strategic balance.

Considering the serious diplomatic price Germany may have paid for the Kaiser's dalliance with the Sultan in 1889, it is peculiar that nine years passed before Wilhelm bothered to visit his friend Abdul Hamid again. The Kaiser's oriental fixation, it would seem, was only one of his passing fancies, which had evaporated as quickly as it came over him. It is true that, following the Sultan's repression of an Armenian uprising in August 1896, Wilhelm famously sent a signed photograph of himself to Abdul Hamid to mark the latter's birthday, just as everyone else in Europe was condemning the Kaiser's friend as the 'Bloody Sultan' and 'Abdul the Damned'. It is less well known, however, that the Kaiser also conspired at this very time with the British Prime Minister Lord Salisbury to reach an agreement on the partition of the Ottoman Empire in the case of its collapse, with the aim of tempting Russia to abandon her alliance with France. Luckily for Wilhelm's relations with Abdul Hamid, Lord Salisbury quickly dropped the idea, and the news of the Kaiser's approach to Salisbury was not leaked to the press.⁹

Still, Wilhelm never forgot the charms of Constantinople. When at last he returned to the Bosphorus in October 1898, there was little left to restrain the Kaiser from a full-blown diplomatic offensive. Old Bismarck had died earlier that summer, banishing any lingering qualms the Kaiser might have felt over pursuing his more assertive foreign policy. None of the great man's successors in the Chancellery or Foreign Office – Caprivi, Holstein, Marschall, Hohenlohe or Bülow – had yet figured out how to rein in the Kaiser's exuberance. Alarm had recently been growing in Britain about the Kaiser's burgeoning *Weltpolitik* – from his notorious encouragement of the rebellious anti-British Boers in South Africa with the 'Krüger telegram' in 1896, to the German naval expansion programme begun in 1897 – but if anything, the disdain Wilhelm's English cousins increasingly felt for him only goaded him on further in his efforts to upstage them. And so Wilhelm resolved not only on a state visit to the Ottoman capital, but to make a grand tour of the Orient, taking in Rhodes, Malta, Jerusalem, Lebanon and Damascus.

As if to underscore the historic nature of the Kaiser's geopolitical voyage, it was launched on the 100-year anniversary of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, which had inaugurated the first great age of European

Orientalism. Napoleon's invasion had been a disaster for the Ottoman Empire, showing up the military inferiority of the Muslim world against European armies: although the French forces were ultimately repulsed, it was due only to British intervention. The Kaiser's visit, by contrast, was friendly and by invitation; but in its way it was just as portentous as Napoleon's invasion. A throng of Western reporters followed the Kaiser almost everywhere he went, recording the impressions he made and speculating wildly on his motives. It seemed impossible Wilhelm was really just making the rounds and seeing the sights. Was the Kaiser seeking to shore up the Sultan's rule and frustrate Russian, British and French designs on his domains? Or was Wilhelm himself staking a claim to the Ottoman inheritance?

The Kaiser's exuberant behaviour did little to quell these speculations. In Constantinople, Wilhelm presented to the Ottoman people 'a huge and ornate fountain', which still stands in the Hippodrome (known today as the Alman Çeşmesi, or German Fountain). To the Sultan, he wished to have sent a Prussian rifle of the latest design, on which the Ottoman coat of arms was specially mounted. To the Kaiser's chagrin, however, Abdul Hamid declined, at first, to receive his gift, apparently because a rumour had reached his ears that Armenian terrorists were conspiring to kill him with a bomb smuggled into his palace. At last Wilhelm himself brought the Sultan his gift weapon in person, in a trunk carefully protected by a 'wrought iron fire screen', which Abdul Hamid inspected 'with an unmistakable air of elevated mistrust'. To appease his suspicions, the Kaiser bowed before the Sultan with great ceremony and slowly opened the 'ominous casket' with his own hands. Finally reassured that no bombs were inside, Abdul Hamid fondly examined the Kaiser's gun. For the rest of the evening, amity and good cheer prevailed.¹⁰

The curious incident in Constantinople was hardly an encouraging omen for the Kaiser's trip. If the paranoid Abdul Hamid did not trust Wilhelm in his own home, he could hardly have been reassured when the Kaiser rode triumphantly into Jerusalem on 29 October 1898 through a specially cut breach in the city walls, in a Prussian field marshal's uniform and 'mounted on a black charger', as if he were conquering the Sultan's city, rather than visiting it as his guest.¹¹ The ostensible purpose of the visit to Jerusalem was to help dedicate

the new Church of the Redeemer, constructed by German Protestants. But Wilhelm also made a point of pleasing German Catholics, by taking into his protection the *Dormitio beatae virginis*, or presumed site of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. So overwhelmed was Wilhelm when he visited the site that he immediately 'placed himself, his army, and his Empire in the service of the Mother of Christ'.¹² The Kaiser then telegraphed Pope Leo XIII, to make official his protection of Catholics in the Holy Land. Not that Wilhelm was playing favourites: to please northern German Protestants he next offered his sovereign protection to a German evangelical *Weihnachtskirche* in Bethlehem. Piling intrigue upon intrigue, Wilhelm received Theodor Herzl again on 2 November in Jerusalem. Herzl wanted the Kaiser to charter a company to promote German Jewish colonization of Ottoman Palestine, and of course to win the Sultan's backing for the project. The first international Zionist Congress, slated to convene later that month in Basel, would benefit enormously from an endorsement from Kaiser Wilhelm, because of his presumed influence on the Sultan. As always, the Kaiser was swayed quite easily by Herzl's arguments, assuring him solemnly that 'Your movement ... is based on a sound, healthy idea. There is room here for everyone. My personal observations convince me that the land is arable. Only provide water and trees.' In the end, Wilhelm was warned by the Ottoman Foreign Minister Ahmed Tevfik (who was accompanying the tour) that Abdul Hamid was not friendly to Zionism, and quietly dropped the idea.¹³ But the Kaiser's public embrace of Zionism, in the holiest city of Christianity, then under Muslim rule, was dizzying enough whether sincere or not. How could he ever top this?

As it turned out, quite easily. Following a brief stopover in Beirut, the Kaiser made another ceremonial entrance, this time into Damascus. Wilhelm was intoxicated by the first truly Arab town he had ever visited, 'with its characteristic concealed courtyards and their splashing fountains, its fascinating bazaars, and the whole charm of the Saracenic architecture and the Arabs' mode of life'. Wherever Wilhelm went, recalled his State Secretary Bernhard von Bülow, 'the populace welcomed him with a peculiar cry of greeting, a long drawn-out, repeated guttural bellow of "Lululu, Lululu, Lululu", and the monotonous noise intoxicated him as though it had been hashish'.¹⁴

Entranced, Wilhelm laid a wreath on the tomb of the great Muslim warrior Saladin and ‘hung a lamp of solid silver before ordering that a mausoleum of the finest marble be built around it at his expense’. Moved by the Kaiser’s honouring of a great hero of Islam, the city’s leading cleric, Sheikh Abdullah Effendi, organized a banquet in Wilhelm’s honour on 8 November 1898. Here, in one of the most notorious in a career marked by many notorious speeches, the Kaiser paid gushing tribute to the medieval hero of Islam as ‘one of the most chivalrous rulers of all times, the great Sultan Saladin ... a knight without fear or fault’. Making the obvious leap from Saladin to the current Sultan, Wilhelm next saluted the great Abdul Hamid. ‘May the Sultan,’ Wilhelm declaimed with dramatic flourish, ‘and his 300 million Muslim subjects scattered across the earth, who venerate him as their Caliph, be assured that the German Kaiser will be their friend for all time.’¹⁵

Had Kaiser Wilhelm gone around the bend? It was one thing to offer protection to Christians in the Holy Land – although even this sort of manoeuvre could have serious consequences, as Napoleon III had discovered when his courting of Levantine Christians in 1852 had lit the spark which led to the Crimean War.* But here was a powerful Christian sovereign declaring a proprietary interest in nearly all the subjects of the Ottoman Middle East – no less than three Christian denominations, the Jews of Palestine and all of the Muslims to boot. This was not all. By offering his protection, via the Sultan, to ‘300 million Muslims’ around the world, Wilhelm was meddling in the affairs of other powers with Muslim subjects – not least French North Africa, Russian Central Asia and the British Empire, which alone contained some 100 million Muslims spread out over British India, Egypt and the Gulf States. Then, too, there was Persia and southern Mesopotamia, where Shia Muslims had never accepted the Ottoman Sultan as their Caliph. No wonder the Kaiser’s State Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Bernhard von Bülow, tried desperately to edit the text of Wilhelm’s speech before it was released to the press, for fear

* Of course, this may have been what the French Emperor had wanted to do – to provoke Russia into overreacting. In this, Napoleon III was much like the erratic Kaiser Wilhelm II. Both men were far better at conjuring up crises than at profiting from them.

of 'arousing suspicion in ... Paris, London and St Petersburg'. But it was too late: the German Ambassador in Constantinople, Baron Marschall, had already given the text to the Wolff news agency, 'on a direct order from His Majesty'.¹⁶

What was the Kaiser thinking? Interestingly, there does exist a record of the Kaiser's thoughts during this historic tour of the Orient – in the letters he dispatched, improbably, to his 'dear friend Nicky' in St Petersburg. Judging from this correspondence, Wilhelm's strategic goal was to convince both Sultan and Tsar that their true enemy was Great Britain, thus threatening Germany's great rival for global supremacy with a pincer movement. The trump card, Wilhelm believed, was the Muslim world, whose fury had most recently been unleashed against British intervention on behalf of the Christians in Crete in 1897. 'What an effect this act of pillage has had on the Mahometan world,' Wilhelm wrote the Russian Tsar from Constantinople on 20 October 1898: 'What a terrible blow to the prestige of the Christian *en général* in the eyes of the Mussulman and renewal of hatred you can hardly imagine!' Taking 'Nicky' into his confidence, as if the two were already allies in battle with perfidious Albion, the Kaiser told the Tsar to 'Remember what you and I agreed upon at Peterhof never to forget that the Mahometans were a tremendous card in our game in case you or I were suddenly confronted by a war with the certain meddlesome Power!' British India, that is, could be brought low by an Islamic jihad, launched by either Sultan or Tsar, who was himself the 'master of millions of Mahometans'.¹⁷ The idea that Russia was just as vulnerable to Muslim unrest as Britain does not seem to have occurred to Wilhelm – not yet, anyway.

Tossing discretion aside, Kaiser Wilhelm now revealed to the Tsar the underlying motivation for his Muslim charm offensive: he had fallen in love with Islam. Wilhelm decried the ostentation of the Christian churches of the Holy Land, which contrasted unfavourably with the simple adornments of the mosques. 'Fetish adoration,' the Kaiser wrote to Nicholas II from Jerusalem, 'has created a supreme contempt for the Christians with the Moslems', and Wilhelm was inclined to agree with them. All but proclaiming his conversion, the Kaiser now confessed to the Tsar that 'My personal feeling in leaving the holy city was that I felt profoundly ashamed before the Moslems and that

if I had come there without any Religion at all I certainly would have turned Mahommetan!’¹⁸

Thus was born *Hajji Wilhelm*, the mythical Muslim Emperor of Germany, who would cut such a grandiose, yet confusing figure on the world stage in the decades to come. Following the visit to Damascus, rumours of the Kaiser’s conversion to Islam spread widely throughout the bazaars of the Middle East, helped along by the discovery of ‘passages in the Koran’ which ‘showed that the Kaiser had been ordained by God to free Muslims from infidel rule’.¹⁹ It helped that Germany, unlike Britain and France, was still relatively little known in Ottoman lands: her image was a tabula rasa onto which German propagandists could write whatever they wished. The Kaiser had now given them the script. Germany, led by Hajji Wilhelm, would be the Western protector of Islam, saving this noble faith from the depredations of European imperialism. Like the Kaiser’s conversion, it was a half-truth at best: Germany had her own Muslim colonies, principally in West Africa, which put the lie to the claim that her hands were clean.^{*20} But contradictions have never bothered visionaries.

Where before the budding pan-German activists of the Kaiserreich had little geographical focus for their imperial striving, aside from unedifying disputes with the British over poor scraps of African territory which few Germans really wanted to settle anyway, the Kaiser’s grand tour of 1898 gave the movement the inspiration it needed. Wilhelm himself may not have been clear on the goals of the Ottoman offensive – he changed his mind too often. But pan-German theorists easily remedied this deficiency. Inspired by their Kaiser’s powerful vision, a new generation of intellectuals and adventurers would sketch in the contours of Germany’s *Drang nach Osten*.

Foremost among these visionaries was Max von Oppenheim, the wayward son of the Oppenheim banking dynasty whose family fortune allowed him to moonlight alternately as explorer, writer, diplomat, archaeologist and prospector. Oppenheim, born in 1860, was nearly an exact contemporary of his hero, Kaiser Wilhelm: the two first met

* As of 1900, Germany had some 2.6 million Muslim subjects, most of them in German East Africa.

while serving in similar aristocratic Guards regiments in 1879. The men were introduced by Oppenheim's friend in his 15th Ulan regiment, Albano von Jacobi, following a regimental parade in Strasbourg Wilhelm had come to observe. It is doubtful that young Max made much of an impression on the Hohenzollern prince, but Oppenheim never forgot the encounter, from which he dated 'my respect for our future Kaiser'.²¹

Oppenheim does not say what it was, exactly, that he respected about the then twenty-year-old Wilhelm, but it was not likely to be his soldierly bearing. The future Kaiser's interest in the Prussian army was famously confined to a fascination with its stupendous variety of medals and uniforms; Oppenheim seems to have enjoyed mainly the entrée his smart Ulan Guards get-up gave him to the Strasbourg salons and the Derby races at Baden-Baden. Neither man was cut out for the discipline of military life. The quality Oppenheim responded to in his future Emperor was, rather, Wilhelm's restless curiosity and wanderlust. In this the two men were kindred spirits. But whereas it took Wilhelm a decade's worth of sovereign state visits finally to focus his passion on the Ottoman world (and even then, fleetingly), Oppenheim knew from an early age that his fate lay in the Orient.

As a small boy Max had been given an illustrated edition of *The Thousand and One Nights* for Christmas.* The picaresque tales and exotic images awakened a powerful longing for the East, which Oppenheim would never outgrow. Simply to placate his father, who wanted him to take over the family banking business, Oppenheim did study law in Berlin after leaving the Guards, attaining the rank of *Referendar* (junior barrister) and entering the civil service; but he was not cut out for professional life. In the winter of 1883–4, at the impressionable age of twenty-three, Oppenheim embarked on his first oriental voyage, taking in Athens, Smyrna and Constantinople, where he claims to have danced with half the Greek girls in the city. He never forgot this introduction to the charms of Eastern women: in fact he began collecting

* The Oppenheims, including Max's father Albert, were Jewish; but his mother Paula was Catholic. For professional reasons, Albert Oppenheim converted to Christianity after his marriage. Because of the principle of matrilineal descent in Judaism, Max was thus a gentile twice over – but, as we shall see below, he was never quite able to shake the Jewish connection.

oriental women's costumes, assembling over the years nearly 150 complete ensembles.²²

In 1886, Oppenheim set off on another *Bildungsreise*, this time taking in the Maghreb. It was a more ambitious trip than the first: he could no longer rely on German-speaking Greek girls to ease him gently into the local culture. In the Moroccan capital of Fez, Oppenheim picked up enough Arabic to jabber a bit with the locals. He also picked up his first concubine, an Arab-Berber beauty he purchased in one of the local slave markets. It is curious to note that Oppenheim – counting on local slavers' inability to distinguish between foreign tongues – passed himself off as a Turk, having been told by his interpreter of the 'frightful penalties for Muslim girls who fornicated with infidels'. Islamic sexual morality in Morocco seemed both forbidding and strangely titillating: with impersonal Western-style prostitution unknown, men instead purchased temporary female sex-slaves (*Sklavinnen*), savoured their sensual delights as if monogamously, and then 'freed' them, as Oppenheim did after enjoying his concubine for about a month.*

As his foray into the slave market implies, Oppenheim was not lacking in daring. Despite still knowing only the barest smattering of spoken Arabic, the young adventurer made a point of entering every single mosque in Fez, knowing full well that 'as the first European to do so', he was 'evidently risking his life'.[†] Oppenheim also risked his own skin – and those of his companions – when he confronted bandits attempting to rob his caravan in the Rif mountains between Wezzan and Fez. A fine shot – young Max had honed his marksmanship by shooting daily whenever he visited his uncle Heinrich at the latter's rural estate in Wiesbaden – Oppenheim fired off five bullets, piercing with each one the water-bottles carried by the robbers, then fired in the air, before quickly reloading his six-shooter. 'After a brief discussion,'

* Oppenheim's half-Berber concubine was later betrothed to the nephew of Oppenheim's guide/interpreter, Omar Barrade.

[†] Adding strangeness to these already improbable adventures, Oppenheim claims to have been accompanied on his mosque tour by the very nephew who was betrothed to his concubine. It is not known whether the two men discussed their shared object of desire while praying together.

he recalls, 'the robbers quickly fled and had soon disappeared from sight'. He may not have spoken Arabic fluently yet, but Oppenheim had already mastered the real *lingua franca* of the Orient: superior force.²³

It was not until he finally resigned from the civil service in 1892, however, that Oppenheim could truly devote himself to the Orient. This time the young explorer spared no expense in preparing his voyage, assembling a small team of archaeologists and hiring a full-time Arab instructor soon after his caravan arrived in Egypt. Determined not only to taste the delights of the Orient, but to become a true connoisseur of its culture, religion and customs, Oppenheim leased a small house in an old Arab neighbourhood in Cairo on Crocodile Alley, in which none of the servants spoke anything but Arabic. Financially independent, and to all purposes unemployed, Oppenheim was ready to 'go native'. Using Cairo as his home base – which it would remain, with brief interruptions, until 1909 – he now began the scholarly exploration of the Middle East which would be his life's work.

After docking at Beirut, the Oppenheim caravan carried on to Damascus, where they purchased camels and supplies for the long journey across the desert to Mesopotamia. The ostensible purpose of the exploring party was to scour for archaeological ruins, such as those of the ancient city of Palmyra, which they found near the modern settlement of Deir ez Zor. An abiding distraction, however, was the threat of Bedouin raids. The Turkish authorities provided an armed escort of twenty soldiers to accompany Oppenheim's party as they ventured south into Bedouin territory. But Oppenheim was more curious than afraid of the nomads. Here was a sort of living anthropology: groups of hardy survivors who still lived as they had for centuries, roaming freely across thinly populated desert areas and living off the booty from raids, tribute and protection money. What were their customs and beliefs? Were they proper Muslims, or did they retain pre-Muslim tribal superstitions? And what was their relation to the Ottoman authorities, and the holy cities of Arabia?

Oppenheim was particularly taken with the Bedouins of the Shammar tribe, based in central Arabia but whose wanderings brought them frequently into desert areas of present-day Iraq, the Sinai and Syria. The Shammar were led by the Rashid clan, one of the three main contenders – along with Ibn Saud's Wahhabis in the Nejd and

the Hashemites of Mecca – for primacy in the Arabian peninsula. Faris Pasha, the Sheikh of the Shammar, invited Oppenheim to stay in the Bedouin camp for several nights as an honoured guest. He was obviously enthralled with the ways of the Shammar, snapping a series of romantic black-and-white photographs and describing their customs with great empathy and care. He was quite taken with the tribe's old-fashioned virtues, such as fierce courage in battle and hospitality to strangers. The Shammar's characteristic vices he found equally striking: 'his caprice, his covetousness and taste for robbery, and his violent temper'. Perhaps it was as well that Oppenheim stayed only for a few days.²⁴

His reports on the Shammar, sent in to the German government and later expanded into a political travelogue, *From the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf*, began to establish his reputation as a regional expert: T. E. Lawrence later cited Oppenheim's work as 'the best book on the area I know'.²⁵ It was not yet clear, however, just what, exactly, the young explorer was an expert *on*. Although Oppenheim would usually find an archaeological pretext for his trips into Bedouin country, it was not until 1899 that he made his first real find, the Neolithic settlement at Tell Halaf, in north-eastern Syria close to the Turkish border (and he would not begin excavating this site until 1911).

Nourished by his servants and teachers in the Arab quarter of Cairo, Oppenheim's spoken Arabic was coming along well, although his accent was noticeable. This allowed him to speak with Bedouins like the Shammar in their own language, and to pass when needed as a Muslim (he usually dressed in Arab garb on his travels). But there is little evidence that he did any serious reading of Arab literature or Islamic history. In this, the golden era of European, and particularly German, Orientalism – the age of titans like Ignaz Goldziher, Snouck Hurgronje, Theodor Nöldeke and Carl Heinrich Becker – the contributions of Max von Oppenheim seem to have made scarcely a ripple.*

If his scholarship did not win him acceptance into the ranks of academic Orientalism, however, Oppenheim's Arabist travelogues

* Oppenheim is not mentioned, for example, in Robert Irwin's examination of German Orientalism in *For Lust of Knowing. The Orientalists and their Enemies* (2006).

were more successful on a political level, as a kind of audition for the German Foreign Office (*Auswärtiges Amt*). Having rejected the discipline of army life and the boredom of the civil service, he still wished to serve his country and his entrée into native Arab circles in the Near East was his main selling point with the Foreign Service, which did not generally admit non-nobles, and was particularly unwelcoming to Jews.*²⁶

To get around the obstacle of his Jewish background, Oppenheim willingly renounced his ancestral Jewish faith and claimed to have fully embraced his mother Paula's Catholicism. (Considering that he frequently told Arabs he was a Muslim, this may not have seemed like a great stretch to him.) His claim was backed up by Paul Graf von Hatzfeldt, one of Bismarck's protégés and a former State Secretary, who was then German Ambassador to London. Sponsorship by the illustrious Hatzfeldt, who spoke highly of Oppenheim's potential as a regional analyst, at last secured the ambitious young traveller a paid post in the Cairo Consulate in 1896. Curiously, however, he seems never to have been given a proper diplomatic title or rank. Whether this was because of his Jewish origins, or to offer the Foreign Office plausible deniability in case the young adventurer got into trouble, is unclear. But it rankled with Oppenheim. Try though he might to pass as a Christian or a Muslim, he repeatedly ran up against the iron law of the Orient (and, evidently, the German Foreign Office): once a Jew, always a Jew.

Oppenheim was far too ambitious, however, to be discouraged by the reluctance of the Foreign Office grandees to admit him into the highest social circles. Besides, he had always preferred the native quarter of Cairo to the European, the dust and din of the Arab souk to the artificial polished order of the diplomats' quarter, the call of the muezzin to the dinner bell at Embassy banquets. His ambition was far too

* Although there was no formal ban on Jews serving in the *Auswärtiges Amt*, the anti-Semitism was not subtle. Friedrich von Holstein, senior counsellor since the 1870s, specifically ruled out Oppenheim as a candidate for the Foreign Service in 1891, on two 'disqualifying grounds': that he was a 'full-blooded Jew' (i.e. both of his parents were Jewish: which was incorrect) and that he was 'from a banking family'.

grand for him to concern himself with petty consular politics and his dream was to reach the ear of the Emperor himself. By the time of Wilhelm's grand Near Eastern tour of 1898, Oppenheim was well placed, as the Germans' main Arab political analyst in Cairo, to capitalize on the Kaiser's oriental diplomacy. Knowing Wilhelm's taste for flattery, Oppenheim felt no need to be subtle as he began salting his consular reports with obsequious references to the great figure Wilhelm had cut in the Arab world. He wrote in one dispatch, describing his own 1899 journey in Asiatic Turkey:

In Damascus as on my further travels I was struck by the powerful impression the visit of His Majesty the Kaiser had made on the Mohammedans of Syria, and it was not difficult to observe what a particularly fine reputation the German name is endowed with, now more than ever ... German businessmen in Beirut, Damascus and Aleppo have assured me, that the blessing of His Majesty's visit has expanded their business opportunities in tangible measure. The wreath, which His Majesty laid at the tomb of Saladin in Damascus, has been enshrined as a relic in a glass case ... A memorial tablet commemorating the Kaiser's visit was placed in a special protective display case in the glorious temple to Jupiter in Ba'albek.²⁷

With buttery praise like this, it is not surprising that Oppenheim came to the Kaiser's attention as a man he could count on to spread the good word about Germany in the Near East. Although the extent of his influence on the Kaiser's foreign policy ideas remains unclear, there was undoubtedly an important meeting of these similar minds in Potsdam in summer 1900, just two years after Wilhelm's visit to Damascus, arranged by the Cairo Consul-General, Paul Graf von Metternich. Having read (or at least skimmed) several of Oppenheim's reports on Arab politics, the Kaiser invited his contemporary to dine. Following dinner, Oppenheim showed Wilhelm several hundred photographs he had taken on his 1899 journey through eastern Turkey, Syria and Mesopotamia. The Kaiser was predictably enthralled, and bombarded Oppenheim with questions about Islam, the desert bedouins and their customs. As a reward for his copious counsel on a region close to Wilhelm's own heart, the Kaiser promoted Oppenheim to the rank of Chief Legal Counsel (*Legationsrat*).²⁸

Thus began an annual tradition, as Oppenheim returned to Berlin each summer to escape the brutal heat of Cairo and entertained the Kaiser with tales of oriental life. Wilhelm was not always an inveterate talker, as many suspected from his sometimes incontinent speechifying: in fact he quite enjoyed listening while he ate.²⁹ This was particularly true with Oppenheim, who was so loquacious that he often neglected his food, to the Kaiser's amusement. On one occasion Oppenheim's favourite dish in the world, lobster with melted butter, was served up, but removed by the waiters before the poor man had the chance to taste it. The Kaiser laughed boisterously at his talkative friend's misfortune, but made no move to recall the waiter to bring the lobster back. This was just the kind of teasing Wilhelm had always revelled in.³⁰

Convinced that he was now the Kaiser's own personal envoy to the Islamic world, Oppenheim's work in Cairo took on an almost hypomaniac quality. Between 1896 and 1909, he filed no less than 467 reports on Arab politics for the German Foreign Office, many of them running to a hundred pages or more. The subjects ranged from pan-Islam (a theme of particular interest to Kaiser Wilhelm) to Christian minorities; from plans for restoring irrigation networks in the Valley of Babylon to possible routes for the Baghdad railway; from Egyptian dynastic politics to the depredations of the British occupation authorities; from the British navy and its influence on the Muslim hajj to the Sherifiate of Mecca and the tribal politics of the Hejaz; from the nature of the Caliphate and the Sunni-Shia divide to messianic Islamic cults and the followers of the Mahdi in Sudan. If Oppenheim's approach to these subjects was not especially fresh, he still brought to all of them a wide-ranging curiosity and single-minded passion – that passion being the need for Germany to defend the Ottoman Empire against the British bogeyman, or what he liked to call the 'English-Mohammedan-African-Asian Colonial Empire'.*

Oppenheim's reports have a relentless and repetitive quality, and yet we should not dismiss their importance on grounds of lack of originality. Like all hack-work, his dispatches from Cairo reveal the

* These reports are all preserved in the German Foreign Office archives in Berlin (PAAA). Some are also available in the US. They will be referred to individually below.

animating obsessions of his time and place, in this case the increasingly chauvinistic and anti-British thinking of pan-Germans encouraged by the Kaiser's *Weltpolitik*, and how their pan-Germanism opportunistically merged together with anti-imperialist pan-Islam.* Reporting on a wave of Lebanese Christian migration to America in spring 1903, for example, he deplored the economic impact of this brain drain on Beirut, before launching into a tirade against the local French, English, Russian and American missionary schools. It was these institutions of Western Christian imperialism, Oppenheim thundered, which 'implanted in the native Christians of Syria and Lebanon instinctive anti-Turkish sentiments and a desire for secession from the Ottoman Empire'. Because this population of would-be rebels knew that Germans were 'friends of the Sultan and opponents of the separation of any part of the Ottoman Empire', Syria's Christians would always remain 'hostile to us' (i.e. to Germans). And so he galloped home to his conclusion: Syrian Christians should be ignored in Germany's regional plans. They were 'the most unscrupulous and unreliable elements ... among the many races of the Orient'.³¹

In this way the great ethnic mosaic of the Near East was ground down in the pan-German mind to the crude categories of pro-German and anti-German, of groups who would be useful to the expansion of German influence or should be summarily brushed aside. The dividing factor was not necessarily confessional, but whether a given population supported the Kaiser's friend Sultan Abdul Hamid or not: thus Zionist Jews were OK (for now), but Maronites, Coptic and Armenian Christians were anathema, as like as not British stooges.[†] Muslims could fall into either category. For the most part, Sunni Muslims were reliable, but possible rivals to Sultan Abdul Hamid's spiritual authority as Caliph, like the self-proclaimed Mahdi and his followers in Sudan, needed to

* In its original form, the idea of pan-Germanism referred merely to the unification of the German-speaking peoples of Europe in a single state. By the 1890s, however, the idea had taken on distinctly imperialist overtones. The Pan-German League (*Alldeutscher Verband*), founded in 1894, was openly expansionist, promoting German colonization in Africa and the Near East.

[†] For example, Oppenheim thought most Armenians in Cairo were in the pay of Lord Cromer, the Consul-General.

be carefully monitored.³² Oppenheim was also suspicious of both the Sherif of Mecca and his rival Ibn Saud's tribe of Wahhabi Muslims, believing both (correctly, as it turned out) to be in the pay of British agents. Ibn Rashid, by contrast, and his Shammar Bedouins, were loyal to the Sultan, and thus implicitly pro-German.³³

Egyptian nationalists, too, were useful, because their opposition to the British occupation implied an endorsement of the Sultan's sovereign claim over Cairo. And so Oppenheim befriended them all, from the sulking Khedive Abbas Hilmi, to Mustafa Kamil, founder of the Egyptian National Party and editor of *al Liwa*, to Sheikh Ali Yusuf, editor of *Al-Mu'ayyad*, to the faculty firebreathers at al-Azhar University. Not surprisingly, these men told him what he wanted to hear: they were all great admirers of the Kaiser. Oppenheim even organized a banquet in Mustafa Kamil's honour in Berlin in 1905, after which occasion Kamil was given a regular column in the *Berliner Tageblatt* ('Letter From an Egyptian Patriot') in which he berated the British on behalf of Germany.³⁴ The Wilhelmstrasse may have denied that it viewed Britain with hostility, but the German press knew otherwise. Any enemy of Germany's enemy was a friend.

Like the Kaiser on his grand tours, Oppenheim was in his element in the back streets of Cairo, living the life he had dreamed of having since boyhood. He resided in the old Arab quarter of Bab el Louk, in an early nineteenth-century pasha's palace fitted out with all the delights of the Orient. There was a proper dining room (*Selamlık*) in which Oppenheim greeted European visitors, but the beating heart of the place was the inner *harem*, where he kept his concubines. Every autumn, after his return from Berlin, Oppenheim's head servant Soliman would procure him a new slave girl (he called them his *Zeitfrauen*, or temporary concubines), who would become mistress of the harem until the following year, and who was herself served by two female attendants. He lived a double life, entertaining consular colleagues or visiting German politicians (like future Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg) in his outer *Selamlık*, while carefully concealing the women's *harem* within. Only on one occasion did the veil come loose. Intrigued by a married woman named Zenab, whose bewitching figure had attracted him on the street through her *burqa*, Oppenheim arranged a secret rendezvous which quickly blossomed into a steamy affair: he even

kicked his current *Zeitfrau* out of the house so that Zenab would not be jealous. But Zenab's husband found them out, and drowned her in the Nile.³⁵

Considering the swaggering figure Oppenheim was cutting around Cairo, and the vitriolic anti-English tone of his consular reports, it is not surprising that he came to the attention of the British authorities there. His house, located near al-Azhar University and the headquarters of the radical paper *al Liwa*, was notorious as a meeting place for would-be revolutionaries. Lord Cromer, the controversial Consul-General who had more or less ruled Egypt since the 1880s, had long suspected Oppenheim as a renegade German agent sent by the Kaiser to stir up Egyptian nationalists and Islamic agitators. When the so-called Kaba or Aqaba border crisis broke in 1906,^{*} these suspicions boiled over into full-scale paranoia. 'Baron Max von Oppenheim',[†] British and French papers began reporting from Cairo, was in constant communication with Moukhtar Pasha, the Ottoman High Commissioner in Egypt representing the Sultan; he was hosting rabble-rousers in his home; he was distributing blood-curdling pamphlets urging on pan-Islamic jihadi massacres of European colonists; and he was intriguing with anti-French Algerian and anti-Italian Tripolitan rebels too.³⁶ All this was more or less true, as was implicitly confirmed by the non-denial denial issued by the German Consulate. The mysterious Baron, German Consul-General Graf Metternich told Sir Charles Hardinge, 'had no official position in Cairo', although Metternich admitted, in a seeming contradiction, that Oppenheim did receive a salary and enjoyed diplomatic privileges.³⁷

Oppenheim himself, meanwhile, responded to the British accusation that he was inciting Arab subjects to a dangerous level of anti-British

^{*} In part because Egypt was still nominally part of the Ottoman Empire under international law, the 'Egyptian-Ottoman' border remained very loosely defined. In 1905, Heinrich August Meissner 'Pasha' proposed to the Porte the extension of the Hejaz railway to Aqaba on the Gulf coast, which would turn the southern Sinai desert into important strategic real estate. Both the Ottoman government and the British sent troops to the area, and the crisis very nearly blew up into a war.

[†] The origin of Oppenheim's title of Baron ('Freiherr' in German) remains unclear, aside from the fact that he put it on his own calling card. It took some time, but eventually the moniker stuck. After his name burst into the headlines in 1906, he was generally referred to both inside and outside Germany as 'Baron Oppenheim'.

hatred by sending the German Foreign Office even more vitriolic anti-British screeds. Their press campaign against him over Aqaba, Oppenheim tried to explain to the Wilhelmstrasse, showed that the British had 'thrown off the mask and have now begun openly to turn on the Sultan'. The Aqaba border question was turning into 'a struggle for prestige in the eyes of the entire Mohammedan world, being played out in the Sinai between England and Turkey'. Far from being something for Germans to worry about, this presented Berlin with a golden opportunity. In any war between Great Britain and the Ottoman Empire, Oppenheim predicted, 'the embers of rebellion would burst into flames in all of [Britain's] Muslim colonies, and in so frightful a way that England would have to use all her troops and a great portion of her navy to put them out'.³⁸ The green turban had been quiescent for centuries, but 'in the future', he prophesied, 'Islam will play a much larger role ... the striking power and demographic strength of Islamic lands will one day have a great significance for European states'. 'We must not forget,' he wrote to the Wilhelmstrasse, 'that everything taking place in a Mohammedan country sends waves across the entire world of Islam.' Germany, Oppenheim believed, could ride the crest of this wave of anti-British pan-Islamism to world power.³⁹

Like all would-be prophets, Oppenheim was ahead of his time. Although they appreciated his informative reporting on Egyptian and broader Arab politics, Oppenheim's superiors in the Foreign Office were not yet ready to risk a war with Great Britain over Ottoman border disputes. His position in Cairo did improve temporarily after Lord Cromer finally stepped down from his post in 1907, but it was only a matter of time before another scandal broke. In the event, it was a relatively minor incident, Oppenheim's reputed takeover in autumn 1909 of a radical newspaper, *Masr el Fatat*, which did the trick. Once again, the English and French newspapers were lit up with wild speculation about the Kaiser's spy, this 'occult agent of Germany'.⁴⁰ Oppenheim was publicly denounced by the new British-appointed Egyptian Minister-President Boutros Ghali,* a Coptic Christian who does not seem to have appreciated the Baron's promotion of pan-Islam (this

* Grandfather of Boutros Boutros-Ghali, Secretary-General of the United Nations from 1992 to 1997.

was Oppenheim's own interpretation). Another Christian, a Cairo businessman of Levantine origin, wrote to the President of the German Reichstag that Oppenheim was ruining Germany's reputation with his intrigues, warning that 'the presence of this man in Egypt is a perpetual danger, a grave menace to peace'.⁴¹ This was too much even for Oppenheim's sponsors in the Wilhelmstrasse, who finally washed their hands of him. He was given a year's paid vacation, then formally sacked from the Foreign Office in November 1910. However, Kaiser Wilhelm, to cushion the blow to one of his favourites, gave Oppenheim the title of a Minister Resident at large.⁴²

Oppenheim was not the only German Orientalist to run afoul of the British in pre-war Cairo. Just as the Baron's bravado had often put his caravan companions – and his Cairo lovers – into harm's way, Oppenheim had gradually roped a promising young German scholar into his dangerous adventures in pan-Islam. This was Curt Prüfer (born 1881), who began work at the German Consulate in Cairo in 1907. Like that of his mentor (and that of their mutual hero, Kaiser Wilhelm), Prüfer's restlessness seems to have arisen in large part from his strained relations with his family. His father Carl, a schoolteacher of liberal democratic views, tried to dissuade his son from government service, warning that the creeping authoritarianism of Wilhelmine Germany would corrupt him. But Curt would have none of this. Burning with the ambition of the lower middle class, he studied both law and Oriental languages at the University of Berlin, in the hope of preparing for the prestigious (and socially exclusive) Foreign Office. A far more serious student than Oppenheim, Prüfer completed a doctoral dissertation in Egyptology at the University of Erlangen in 1906. By this time, Prüfer had already mastered French, English, Italian and Arabic, and 'could understand Turkish, Russian, Spanish, and Portuguese'. It was clear, said an admiring Orientalist colleague, that Prüfer 'possessed phenomenal linguistic talent'. He made a perfect choice for dragoman, a kind of all-purpose translator, interpreter and cultural consultant, of Germany's Consulate in Cairo in 1907, and was rapidly promoted to Oriental Secretary.⁴³

Had Prüfer's career followed its natural course, he would have established himself as one of the leading Western scholars in Cairo. By diplomatic convention, enshrined in a treaty between Germany and

(British-occupied) Egypt in 1904, a German national was always to be appointed as director of the Khedivial Library in Cairo, one of the most prestigious positions for Orientalists in the entire world. When Professor Bernhard Moritz prepared to step down from the coveted post in September 1911, the new German Consul-General, Hermann Graf von Hatzfeldt, put Prüfer's name forward for the position of library director, to no one's surprise. Prüfer was a rising star, indisputably the top young German Orientalist in town.

Yet Curt Prüfer had not strictly followed the career path of a scholar. Baron Oppenheim, twenty years his senior and grand man about town, had introduced the young dragoman to his fiery nationalist friends, particularly Sheikh Abdul Aziz Shawish, successor to the now-deceased Mustafa Kamil at *al Liwa*. Sheikh Shawish, a Tunisian pan-Islamist who ran guns to Libya during the Turco-Italian war which broke out in September 1911, was seen by the British as 'an incredibly venomous opponent', owing to 'his unreasoning fanaticism, his overwhelming egoism, and his malignant perversion and disregard of truth'.^{*44} Oppenheim had also dragooned Prüfer along on his voyages into Bedouin country, both men dressing as Arabs as they searched for 'ancient ruins' (or gathered intelligence, as the British suspected). All this was sufficient for the British to rule Prüfer out as a candidate for the Khedivial Library directorship, on the grounds that his 'activities are those of a confidential political agent, rather than those of a student of Arabic'.⁴⁵

Lord Kitchener, the conqueror of Khartoum who had recently been seconded to the British Consulate in Cairo, had good reason to be concerned about Prüfer's political activities. Earlier in 1911, Boutros Ghali, the Coptic Christian Minister-President whose objection to Oppenheim's pan-Islamist intrigues had provoked the latter's removal from Cairo, was assassinated by a young Muslim fanatic. Christian-Islamic tensions in Cairo were thus already running high when the Turco-Italian war erupted in September, just as the diplomatic crisis over the Khedivial Library appointment was breaking. It hardly

*This was the description of John Romich Alexander, in *The Truth About Egypt* (1911). Curiously, this excerpt on Shawish from Alexander's book was later used by the Germans as a *recommendation* for putting Shawish on the imperial payroll.

helped Prüfer's case that he was observed recruiting Egyptian Muslim volunteers to cross into Libya to fight the Christian Italians, jihad-style.⁴⁶ Because the Khedivial Library housed ancient Islamic manuscripts and was used primarily by Muslims, Kitchener was worried that it could easily 'become a natural centre of ... Pan-Islamic doctrine', particularly if a German agent like Prüfer was in charge.⁴⁷ To beat the Germans at their own game, Kitchener proposed in October that, because of its importance for Islam, the Khedivial Library should henceforth have only a Muslim as director.⁴⁸ To win German acquiescence to the rejection of Prüfer's appointment, Kitchener would allow the Germans to have the post of assistant library director, and the directorship of the Cairo Museum. As a sop to his bruised ego, Curt Prüfer would be given a scholarly award.⁴⁹

Still, the Germans stood by their man. Consul-General Hatzfeldt was adamant that Prüfer was the most qualified for the position. His animated correspondence with Kitchener on the subject reveals a great deal about the burgeoning rift in Cairo caused by the German embrace of pan-Islam, and by Baron Oppenheim's activities in particular. As a final trump card, Kitchener threw Oppenheim's name at Hatzfeldt as proof positive of Prüfer's unsuitability for the library directorship, claiming that as the Baron's 'personal secretary', Prüfer had sullied himself with spy work. In another classic non-denial denial, Hatzfeldt replied that Prüfer's 'relations with Baron Oppenheim have always been purely social ones and these too were very slight'. Somewhat painfully, Hatzfeldt offered to enlist Oppenheim himself (now cataloguing his Tell Halaf ruins) to clear Prüfer's name – by issuing a sworn affidavit denying that he had any influence over him.⁵⁰ Poor Oppenheim had now been disowned entirely by the Foreign Office he had striven so mightily to join. And yet the Baron must have felt even worse for his young protégé Curt Prüfer, who, unlike him, did not have a private fortune to fall back on.

Deprived of his dream job and still only thirty years old, Prüfer would never forget the snub, or the men who had snubbed him. Nor would Oppenheim easily forgive that 'certain meddling power' whose representatives had forced him to leave his beloved Cairo in disgrace. Like their hero Wilhelm II, sneered at his whole life by his arrogant British cousins for his social awkwardness,

Oppenheim and Prüfer had a score to settle with Albion. And so it was that three privileged, well-travelled cosmopolitans, raised amidst the splendour of European civilization at the height of its glory, each serving a young empire entering its golden age of prosperity, achievement and influence, came to burn with seething resentment against the established power whose continued pre-eminence mocked German pretensions to world leadership. Pursued by demons only they understood, the Kaiser, the Baron, the Dragoman, and those who served them, would make the world pay for its failure to recognize their greatness.

2

Berlin to Baghdad

To extend the railway from Haydarpasha to Baghdad ... to build this line with only German materials and for the purpose of bringing goods and people to [Asia] via the most direct path from the heart of Germany ... will bring closer the day when [Bismarck's] remark about the entire Orient not being worth the bones of a Pomeranian Grenadier will seem like a curious historical memory.

Baron Marschall von Bieberstein, German Ambassador
to Constantinople, 1899¹

Heading east from Istanbul by train today, alert travellers may be struck by architectural anomalies which seem out of place in contemporary Anatolia. If the stately *fin de siècle* German imperial style of the railway stations at Haydarpasha and at Adana, the gateway to the eastern Mediterranean, seems at least congruous with the importance of these cities, the same cannot be said for identical-looking stations at tiny villages along the way. From modest-sized stops at Karaman and Ereğli to virtual ghost towns like Durak (population: 148), the same yellow Swabian stucco stationhouses with white trim and red-tiled roofs greet those few passengers alighting en route. So light is the traffic on the line that only one passenger train per day sets off in both directions. Because there is only a single track, the east- and west-bound trains must wait in a station to pass each other. Now, as in its earliest days, the cross-Anatolian 'express' serves mostly through-traffic, crawling along at

a snail's pace through a dry, windswept plateau almost entirely devoid of human habitation.

It has been a long, hard fall for the Baghdad railway and the Germans who planned, financed and built it. Most people now associate the line not with Germany at all, but with British authors and heroes. James Bond stows the Soviet code machine away aboard the Orient Express as he escapes from Istanbul in *From Russia With Love*. Graham Greene sets one of his classic thrillers blending political intrigue, crime and romance aboard the *Stamboul Train*. Hercule Poirot solves one of Agatha Christie's most famous murder mysteries aboard the legendary line, picking up clues in Syria which help him solve the crime somewhere in Bulgaria. *Murder on the Orient Express* has even been turned into a tourist attraction by the owners of the Pera Palace Hotel in Beyoğlu, the old European quarter of Istanbul.

There is something curious about these stories and their hold on the popular imagination. While not immune to the charms of the East, neither James Bond nor any of the characters in *Stamboul Train* or Agatha Christie's bestseller is remotely an Orientalist. Their concerns are exclusively Western, related to socialism and class warfare, European anti-Semitism, the Cold War, or domestic affairs back home. The minarets and muezzins of Islam do not factor at all.

It takes a leap of imagination, then, to voyage back in time to the bitter *fin de siècle* struggles over the Baghdad railway, when the Orient was still full of mystery, a romantic dream world to the West, still partly unmapped, the last and potentially greatest frontier of European exploration. Baghdad itself was a name of mythic grandeur, conjuring up images of *The Thousand and One Nights*, Baron Oppenheim's boyhood bedtime reading. Mesopotamia, the legendary Land of Two Rivers, had been slumbering in economic stagnation for centuries, ever since the Europeans' circumnavigation of Africa in the 1400s had put paid to the landward trade routes. Even before the collapse of the oriental carry trade, the Mongol invasion of the thirteenth century had ruined the old Persian and Mesopotamian irrigation networks, such that the ancient breadbasket of the world now lay barren. And yet, if the floods of the Tigris and Euphrates

were again harnessed and controlled, wrote one English irrigation engineer:

the delta of the two rivers would attain a fertility of which history has no record; and we should see men coming from the West, as well as from the East, making the Plain of Samarra a rival of the land of Egypt. The flaming swords of inundation and drought would have been taken out of the hands of the offended Seraphim, and the Garden of Eden would have again been planted.²

Baghdad, to be sure, was not much to look at in the late nineteenth century. A city of only some 150,000 people, which served mostly as a way-station for nomads and caravan traffic, it was a sleepy backwater of the Ottoman Empire, by general consensus the Sick Man of Europe. It would take a heroic effort to bring Mesopotamia's economy back to life, let alone connect it by steel railhead with Constantinople, 2,000 miles distant across swampy marshland, deserts and two forbidding mountain ranges. But this was just the kind of half-mad imperial enterprise *fin de siècle* Europeans excelled in. With Africa's terrors now tamed by the anti-malarial quinine which had allowed the continent to be carved up by European colonists, and Asia and the Americas connected by steam-powered sea vessels to the hubs of global commerce, only Asiatic Turkey remained a key zone outside the expanding web of world trade. Baghdad may not have itself been much of a prize, but just 500 miles beyond it to the south-east lay the port of Basra on the Persian Gulf, whence flowed sea-borne traffic to India and the Far East. A railway linking Europe with the Persian Gulf could offer a faster trade route to the Orient, outpacing not only the long sea voyage around Cape of Good Hope but even the shorter Suez Canal route (by three days, if the calculations of railway planners held true).

It was an entrancing vision for the European powers, beginning with the British, already the predominant trading power in the Persian Gulf. As the traditional protector of Turkey against Napoleonic and then Russian encroachment, Great Britain seemed, at first glance, a natural candidate to develop the infrastructure of the Ottoman Empire. It was not only the breadbasket of Babylon which beckoned to the British classical imagination: there was also Asia Minor, ancient

cockpit of Alexander's army, now poor and sparsely populated, a pale remnant of its former glories under Persia, Hellas, Byzantium and the Ottoman Empire's own salad days under Süleyman the Magnificent. 'Verily Anatolia,' wrote D. G. Hogarth, the Oxford mentor of Lawrence of Arabia, 'is one of the gardens of the temperate earth, and perhaps some day European colonists may return from the lands of fever and fly ... to take up this portion of their more legitimate heritage.'³

Just as we might expect from her position as historic protector of the Porte, Britain had first made the running in Ottoman rail construction, building the lines from Smyrna (Izmir) on the Aegean Sea inland to Kasaba in the 1860s, and from Mersin to Adana along the Mediterranean. Together with the British buyout of the French shares in the Suez Canal Company in 1875, these coastal railways in Asiatic Turkey seemed to herald British dominance of Near Eastern trade traffic. The special relationship between London and Constantinople, however, took serious knocks in the years that followed. Sultan Abdul Hamid's deposition of the newly formed Turkish parliament and constitution in 1878, during the emergency posed by war with the Russians, whose army had reached as far as San Stefano (Yeşilköy, site of today's Atatürk airport), inaugurated an era of palace paranoia at the Porte. Abdul Hamid was particularly suspicious of rail construction near Turkey's coastlines, fearing they would be vulnerable to naval blackmail or bombardment in war-time.⁴ Although the British Tory premier Benjamin Disraeli had, with Bismarck, negotiated a settlement at Berlin in 1878 which forced back the Russians and returned much conquered territory to the Ottomans, Abdul Hamid was not reassured by the return of the notoriously anti-Turkish Liberal William Gladstone to office in 1880. The British annexation of Cyprus in 1878, and the invasion of Ottoman Egypt ordered by the Gladstone government in 1882, marked the beginning of the end of London's special relationship with the Porte, which would never truly recover.

Among the other European powers, France seemed most likely to replace the British as the self-interested European sponsor of the Ottoman Empire. It was Napoleon III, after all, whose courting of Syria's Christians had sparked the Crimean War, in which Britain and France had stood together with the Ottomans against the Russian

invaders. Sure enough, it was the French who moved in when the British began disengaging from Turkey, taking over the Smyrna–Kasaba and Mersin–Adana railways in the 1880s, and assuming a dominant position in the Ottoman Public Debt Administration in Constantinople, just as the British took over Egyptian government finances in Cairo. And it was the French, of course, who had first come up with the idea of a romantic rail route to Turkey: the original ‘Orient Express’ train ran from the Gare de l’Est in Paris to Sirkeci station on Constantinople’s European shoreline in 1889.* But the Franco-Russian defence treaty, concluded in 1894, damaged France’s position at the Porte no less dramatically than had the British occupation of Egypt a decade earlier. If there was a single unshakeable law underlining the Eastern Question, it was that one could not be friends with both Turkey and her historic northern enemy at the same time.

As for France’s new ally, Russia viewed the prospect of Ottoman railway development with unrestrained hostility. Russian diplomats did take a keen interest in rail development in north-eastern Turkey along the Black Sea coast, and in the Armenian areas of eastern Anatolia: but this was only in order to make sure that no lines would ever be built in either region.† Likewise, Russia sought to block plans for a Baghdad railway at every opportunity, making clear to the Porte that any rail construction even remotely near the Russian border would be regarded as a *casus belli*, as it would speed up Turkish troop deployments to the Caucasus. When negotiations over the concession for a Baghdad line heated up in 1899, the Russian press issued dire warnings about possible ‘military consequences’. Behind the dangerous Baghdad railway plan, believed Russian War Minister Kuropatkin (incorrectly), lay the British government.⁵

* By way of Munich, Vienna, Budapest and Belgrade. The original ‘Express d’Orient’, chartered in 1883, had run from Paris to Vienna. The Agatha Christie/James Bond version of the line was actually the ‘Simplon Orient Express’, a more southerly line via Sofia, Zaghreb, Trieste, Venice and Milan, established following the opening of the Simplon tunnel through the Swiss-Italian Alps in 1919.

† By the terms of the Russian-Ottoman Black Sea Agreement of 1900, the Russian Tsar reserved the right to veto any railway development projects in northern or eastern Anatolian areas abutting the Caucasus.

When we consider the suspicions beginning to swirl around both of Turkey's Crimean War allies at the Porte, it is not surprising that Abdul Hamid began lobbying for imperial Germany to replace them as his protector against the Russian threat. There were promising grounds for an Ottoman-German alliance. The lack of a long German imperial tradition was reassuring to the morbidly suspicious Sultan, as was Germany's geographic remoteness from his domains. The Ottoman Empire shared volatile borders with Austria-Hungary, Russia and now British Egypt, and there was a substantial population of French settlers stirring up Christian minorities in Syria. Germany's footprint in Asiatic Turkey, by contrast, was negligible, confined mostly to the military mission headed by General von der Goltz 'Pasha', which many credited for improved Ottoman performance in the 1897 war with Greece, when the Turks won a series of impressive victories in Thessaly.*

Meanwhile, the astonishing German industrialization spurt which began in the 1880s stimulated enormous demand for imported metals and minerals, not to mention foodstuffs to feed the growing German population. And Asiatic Turkey, European prospectors were beginning to report, was rich in almost everything modern industry requires, from lead, zinc, copper and chrome to lignite and liquid petroleum, this last discovered near Mosul as early as 1871, in what seemed to be inexhaustible quantities. If German steel rail could tame the Anatolian steppe and break through the Taurus mountains, the abundant resources of the Near East could begin feeding the voracious German economy, even while the Sultan's ability to deploy troops to trouble areas was enhanced. Strategically speaking, it was a perfect marriage.

German interests in Ottoman rail were already in full swing when the Kaiser began his courtship of Abdul Hamid. It was a German engineer, Wilhelm von Pressel, who had designed and helped build the first leg of what would become the Baghdad railway, the sixty-mile line stretching from Istanbul's Asian shore along the Sea of Marmara inland to Izmit, completed in 1872. Pressel, sometimes called the 'Father of the Baghdad Railway', grew fond during his years in

* Von der Goltz was given the Ottoman honorific 'Pasha' upon returning to Germany in 1895, following ten years in the Sultan's service.

Anatolia of both Turkey and Turks, believing that the planned railway would reinvigorate the beleaguered Ottoman Empire and allow its peoples to seize control of their own destiny. It is noteworthy that the arch anti-Orientalist Bismarck took personal note of Pressel's advocacy of the Ottoman cause, denouncing him as a 'simple Swabian engineer' who dares to 'tell me what to do'.⁶

If Pressel's vision inspired the creation of the Baghdad railway, however, it was not Pressel who would build it. The proposed line to Basra, covering 2,000 miles of arid and largely inhospitable steppe-land, mountains, deserts and swamps, was such an immensely costly undertaking that serious financial backing was necessary – not least because Ottoman Turkey had declared bankruptcy in 1875, its finances now under strict European oversight.* Pressel himself was too stubborn and idealistic to get on with the German money-men who began descending on Constantinople in the 1880s and 1890s, in particular Georg von Siemens, director of Deutsche Bank, whose granting of an emergency loan of 30 million Marks to the Sultan in 1888 put Germany in the driver's seat for the Baghdad concession.⁷ Whereas Pressel wanted to internationalize the Baghdad project as broadly as possible so as to cushion the Ottoman Empire against imperial encroachment by Germany (or any other European power), Siemens was a staunch imperialist who put German interests first. In this Siemens was seconded by Baron Marschall von Bieberstein, Germany's State Secretary and, from 1897, Ambassador to the Porte. In order to supplant French and British influence in Turkey and the Near East, the Baghdad railway, Marschall declared emphatically in 1899, must be constructed 'with only German materials and for the purpose of bringing goods and people to [Asia] via the most direct path from the heart of Germany'.^{†8}

* By the terms of the Decree of Mouharrem signed in 1881, the European-dominated Ottoman Public Debt Administration had control of all revenues raised through customs and tax collection in the empire, from monopoly duties on salt, silk and tobacco production to sales taxes on alcohol and stamps. No less than four-fifths of the revenues collected from these duties went to payment of interest on the Ottoman debt.

†The Berlin-to-Baghdad version of the line (which, in the ideal North Sea to Persian Gulf version, would also incorporate Hamburg and Basra at the far ends) joined up with the old Parisian 'Orient Express' at Vienna, by way of Dresden and Prague.

This was much easier said than done. The Deutsche Bank-owned Anatolian Railway Company (*Société du Chemin de fer Ottoman d'Anatolie*), chartered in 1889 on the heels of Siemens' generous loan to Abdul Hamid the previous year, did complete the extension of the Izmit line to Ankara by 1892 on its own. But even this comparatively modest project, covering only about 250 miles, including a southern detour via Eskişehir (which allowed the railway to bypass the steeper mountain passes of Bolu), had required a million pounds sterling laid down by British bankers to get off the ground (the Germans later bought out the British-owned shares in 1890 in the wake of a credit crunch in the City of London, but this was an emergency measure, not a political move).⁹ A rail line to Baghdad and Basra would likely require outlays of hundreds of millions, which would necessitate 'kilometric revenue guarantees' (a kind of promissory note or bond pegged to each section of line constructed) to reassure investors. Because such revenue could only be processed via the French-dominated Ottoman Public Debt Administration, this meant French interests, too, had to be taken into account.

Even setting aside Pressel's moral case against German domination of the Baghdad railway, there were very good reasons for internationalizing the financing. Had the Germans succeeded in raising enough revenue on their own to begin construction – an unlikely prospect – this would only have excited French, British and Russian suspicions. The more 'German' the Baghdad railway appeared, the more cause Paris, London and St Petersburg would have for trying to sabotage it, or for putting up rival bids for the concession. By contrast, if the Anatolian Railway Company sold shares broadly to French and British interests, it would cushion the financial risk faced by Deutsche Bank, and increase the likelihood the Great Powers would approve the Baghdad concession. The essential thing was camouflage: Germany must appear not to be building the railway alone, while somehow still securing the strategic benefit.

Despite the political difficulties, the Germans had a major advantage in the bidding for the Baghdad concession: the Sultan's personal backing. The proliferating 'Capitulations' which allowed Europeans to run the Ottoman Empire's finances, postal services and transport made Abdul Hamid something of a guest in his own house, but he

was still the nominal sovereign of his empire, and only the sovereign could sign off on the Baghdad concession. After all, selling the right to build this 2,000-mile railway, and to raise the huge customs, ticket and mining concession revenues needed to pay off its sure-to-be-colossal construction debts, was akin to mortgaging the financial future of Ottoman Turkey. So long as the suspicious Sultan lived, he would never mortgage his empire to the British, who had already taken Egypt, one of the crown jewels of his empire. Nor did he trust the French, who were already occupying the (theoretically) Ottoman provinces in the Maghreb and making imperial inroads in Syria, not to mention intriguing openly with Russia, Turkey's mortal enemy. If any Europeans would build the new strategic artery of Asiatic Turkey, it would be the Germans – or no one.

The Kaiser's visit to Constantinople in 1898 raised the stakes in the game, but did not really alter the fundamentals. The Germans wanted to build an Ottoman railway stretching all the way to the Persian Gulf with German steel and skilled labour, but not to take on all the financial risk. The Sultan wanted the Germans to build the Baghdad–Basra line, but only to his own specifications: as far as possible from Turkey's vulnerable Mediterranean coastline, and passing through the volatile Armenian regions of eastern Anatolia, to speed up troop deployments there, whether to meet an Armenian rebellion or a Russian invasion. The British wanted a railway of some kind but one that would link the Mediterranean coast to the Persian Gulf, to stimulate trade. The French, for their part, would have preferred to expand their own Ottoman railway inland from Smyrna, or to build up a serious network stretching into Lebanon and Syria. The Russians wanted to derail, or at least complicate, all of these building projects, except for the regional French lines.

It was impossible, of course, to reconcile all these interests, but the German negotiators did their best. Despite the Sultan's strong preference for a Baghdad line routed eastward from Ankara through Sivas and Diyarbakır, which would avoid the coastline but might wind suspiciously close to the Caucasus, the Germans jettisoned this plan in favour of a more westerly line departing from the existing Anatolian Company railhead at Eskişehir south-east via Konya (reached in 1896), Karaman, Ereğli and Bulgurlu. Ostensibly undertaken to alleviate

Russian concerns, this re-routing in fact made good economic sense, as the new route covered flatter ground (thus cheaper construction costs) and crossed more populated areas (which meant, potentially at least, more profitable traffic). It did, however, bring the German line into west Anatolian territory eyed hungrily by the French-owned Smyrna–Kasaba rail company still building lines inland from the Aegean. Avoiding one potential landmine, the German planners nearly stepped on another. To win over the acquiescence of the Smyrna–Kasaba company (and to avoid a price war over regional fares), the Germans promised in May 1899 that French bankers would receive at least 40 per cent of the capital stock floated by the Baghdad railway undertaking, and that two Smyrna–Kasaba representatives would sit on its board of directors.¹⁰

Meanwhile, a British group fronted by an Austrian banker named Ernest Rechnitzer was proposing to build a rail link from the Turkish port of Alexandretta (today's Iskenderun) direct to Basra. This plan had the obvious advantage of being inexpensive, avoiding the Taurus and Amanus mountain ranges between Anatolia and Syria, and thus (in theory) making unnecessary the imposing 'kilometric guarantees' by which the Sultan would be asked to pledge future tax revenues to railway bondholders.¹¹ By speeding up the transport of goods from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean beyond, the Rechnitzer line had fantastic economic potential. Its disadvantage, of course, was that Rechnitzer's backers were British.

The Sultan's position, no less than the Germans', was delicate. Financially, he may have been better off going with Rechnitzer's consortium, which was offering to lay down initial construction costs all by itself. But a railway which failed to link Constantinople with eastern Anatolia and the Arab Near East would defeat the strategic point for the Sultan.* By stimulating the economies of Syria and Mesopotamia, the Rechnitzer railway might even indirectly promote the cause of Arab independence. Abdul Hamid mostly trusted the

* And for the Germans, who would lose out on the chance of replacing the British-dominated trade routes to the East or the French-dominated tourist traffic to Constantinople, if a full-on Constantinople-to-Baghdad line were not built.

Germans on Siemens' negotiating team, but if they were to build the Baghdad railway he knew they would probably have to raise British and French capital, and administer repayment via the French-dominated Ottoman Public Debt Administration, both of which conditions raised the prospect of further European encroachment on the Sultan's sovereign authority. Trusting no one entirely, the Sultan wished to reserve final control over the railway's routing and construction for himself.

One can hardly blame Abdul Hamid for his caution. Kaiser Wilhelm's disavowal of acquisitive intentions towards the Ottoman Empire during his friendly visit in 1898 was reassuring up to a point, but then this was the same Wilhelm who would famously react to the Boxer Rebellion in China in 1900 by vowing to crush the 'heathens' with such overwhelming force that 'for a thousand years ... no Chinaman ... will dare to look a German in the face'.¹² It was only after vigorous lobbying by German Ambassador Marschall, and the deposit of 200,000 Turkish lira (pounds) (nearly \$1 million at the time, the equivalent of \$100 million today) in the Ottoman Treasury, that Abdul Hamid finally made a decision. On 23 December 1899, the Ottoman Minister of Public Works, Zihni Pasha, signed an agreement with Georg Siemens, representing Deutsche Bank and the Anatolian Railway Company, which obliged the German group to build a railway 'within a *maximum* period of eight years' from Konya to Basra via Baghdad.¹³

It appeared to be a golden deal – for the Sultan. The Germans had pledged themselves to plan and build a vital strategic artery for Abdul Hamid, in less than eight years, and to raise all the capital necessary for the undertaking. Meanwhile, in a clause negotiated at the last minute on the Sultan's personal insistence, the Germans had agreed that the Ottoman government, 'on its side reserves the power of using, whenever it may desire to do so, its right of buying up the line from Konya to Baghdad and Basra'.¹⁴ Since the Sultan's regime was still, effectively, bankrupt, the prospect of his buying out the Baghdad railway was unrealistic, to say the least. But by insisting on the right, the Sultan was drawing a line in the sand. If the Germans crossed this line and somehow violated his sovereignty, he would retaliate. To reiterate the point, Abdul Hamid

announced a ban on all foreign mining concessions in the Ottoman Empire in February 1900, only several months after giving the Germans the Baghdad concession, which cast into doubt the financial viability of the entire undertaking.¹⁵ This was not reassuring to men proposing to invest hundreds of millions of Marks in the railway. As Siemens himself complained, 'the so-called Baghdad Railway Concession is only a piece of paper for which I paid 200,000 Turkish lira!'¹⁶

This was not the only price the Germans had paid for the right to build the Baghdad railway. Although the details were (understandably) never released to the public, the Sultan had demanded a serious political quid pro quo for the deal. As early as June 1898, Abdul Hamid, through his Ambassador to Berlin, had demanded that the Germans share intelligence on revolutionary opponents of his regime, and be ready to deport, on request, specifically named 'agitators' from Germany.¹⁷ In the years following the awarding of the Baghdad concession in 1899, the Kaiser's spies duly provided Abdul Hamid with regular reports on the whereabouts and activities of his 'Young Turk' opponents.*

Still, the German negotiators did not leave Constantinople empty-handed, either. Contradicting the Sultan's public repudiation of foreign mining concessions, Abdul Hamid had quietly agreed to give German prospectors working for the railway company generous exploration rights inside his domains, including copper- and coal-mining grants and broad excavation rights within twenty kilometres of the Baghdad line on either side.¹⁸ A secret imperial *Irâdê* (decree) dated 15 November 1899 – just five weeks before the Baghdad concession was granted – gave the Berlin Museum further rights to keep artefacts German miners or archaeologists might discover while excavating on Ottoman territory. The results, as anyone who has visited the Museum Island in Berlin knows, were dramatic.¹⁹

The Baghdad railway, we might say, was born in sin. Not surprisingly, in light of the political shenanigans surrounding the

* See below, chapter 3.

concession, progress in building it was not swift in coming. It did not help that the concession was signed in the midst of a worldwide depression at the turn of the twentieth century, which scared off many prospective investors. A German expedition sent to scout possible routes to Baghdad in 1899 reported that at least 500 million francs would be needed for construction, and the full eight years allotted by the Sultan's concession, if not more. The Anatolian plains through which the railway would begin its eastward progress from Konya were woefully underdeveloped, with few towns of note, poor agriculture, and no mining or manufacturing to speak of. 'One could ride for hours,' wrote Consul-General Stemrich, the expedition leader, 'without seeing a single cultivated field.'* Without serious investment from outside, central Anatolia offered little potential for profitable traffic.

The Taurus range, meanwhile, was a logistical nightmare, with impassable mountains as far as the eye could see, interrupted only by a few yawning chasms carved by ancient rivers. The famous Cilician passes used by Alexander's army were far too steep for safe rail transport. The mountains could be crossed at a serviceable rail grade only through extensive blasting and the excavation of thousands of tons of rock. In the end, some three dozen tunnels were needed, many of them several kilometres in length.[†] A daunting proposition with the latest technology today, the degree of difficulty of blasting away nearly twelve miles worth of tunnels in 1900 boggles the imagination. Little wonder it took German engineers years of planning and preparation before they could begin tunnelling the Taurus section of the Baghdad railway.

The Syrian and Mesopotamian stretches on the other side of the mountains were no picnic either. Here the railway would have to pass through miles of nomad country, plagued by marauding Kurds, Bedouins and opportunistic bandits of all kinds. What was good fun for adventure-seekers like Baron Oppenheim (who himself did prospecting for the Baghdad Railway Company, among his other covert

* Sad to say, the same is true today.

[†] On a recent train trip through the Taurus, the author counted thirty-seven tunnels.

activities) was a horrible challenge for railway builders.*²⁰ It was not merely the security problem posed by tribal raids which discouraged the German scouts, but the unsuitability of nomadic populations for work on the railway. Nomads were, almost by definition, unsuited to sedentary labour. Armenians and other settled Christian minorities, who dominated what little agricultural cultivation there was in the region, were more promising as a workforce, but if they were enlisted to work on the railway, who would till the land? Skilled foreign workers could, of course, be imported, but they would need higher wages and costly protection. Then there were the swampy, malarial marshes between Baghdad and Basra, where huge quantities of quinine would be necessary to treat workers against disease. All in all, concluded Stemrich's scouting team after outlining likely costs, there was little chance of the railway turning a profit in the near future.²¹

With so many risks surrounding the undertaking, it is not surprising that the financing for the Baghdad railway took years to arrange. Not until 1903 did construction on the line begin, and even then only on the first, flat section from Konya to the foot of the Taurus mountains. In the updated convention signed on 5 March 1903, the new German-dominated Baghdad Railway Company (BRC) was given what seemed to be advantageous terms, such as unlimited use of Ottoman state forests for lumber and state land for 'right of way', both dispensed free of charge. The BRC also received a tax exemption in perpetuity for railway property and revenue. But these concessions were in the Sultan's interest too, designed to get the railway built as quickly as possible. Station depots, post offices and police outposts along the route would all be built by the Germans. The BRC also promised to clear all construction plans with the Porte; to give hiring preference to Ottoman subjects; to discourage further European migration to the Ottoman Empire; to make an annual charity payment of 500 Turkish lira (about \$2,500 then, or \$2.5 million today)

* Several of Oppenheim's visits to his beloved ruins of Tell Halaf, for example, were funded by the Baghdad Railway Company, which was planning to route the railway through nearby Ras el 'Ain in north-eastern Syria. Although the moneymen seem to have taken Oppenheim's gushing reports on future railway revenue potential with a large pinch of salt, they did pick up the tab for his scouting trips.

to Islamic foundations for the poor; and to turn over day-to-day management of the railway to the Ottoman government within five years. More significantly for Abdul Hamid, the BRC agreed to erect telegraph poles at 65-metre intervals along the entire line, to spend 4 million francs on Ottoman military installations along the route and, in case of war, to place at the Sultan's disposal its 'entire rolling stock, or such as might be necessary, for the transportation of officers and men of the army, navy, police and gendarmerie, together with any or all equipment'.²²

Considering how tailor-made these terms were to the extension of the Sultan's sovereign authority over his realm, it is curious to reflect that the press reaction abroad to the Baghdad concession pointed not to the Sultan's clever coup, but to the impending German takeover of the Ottoman Empire. In St Petersburg, *Novoe Vremya* warned that by the time construction of the railway was finished on schedule in 1911, 'Turkey will be completely subjected to German economic control', with 'German merchandise transported from Hamburg to the Persian Gulf exclusively on German railways'. A special report commissioned by French army intelligence concluded the new Baghdad concession to be the work of Moltke the Younger at the German General Staff, with a view to opening up a German line of communication 'from Hamburg to the Far East by way of Berlin, without passing the Suez Canal, that is independent of English influence'.* Although the British government had not followed the BRC negotiations very closely, as Paul Cambon, French Ambassador in London, complained, by April Downing Street, too, was expressing concern about German domination of the railway.²³

The British, French and Russians were right to worry about the expansion of German influence entailed in the Baghdad railway concession of 1903, even if the terms seemed to be personally designed for Sultan Abdul Hamid. There must have been a good reason why German banks had put up nearly two-thirds of the 3 million francs in

* Much as the Germans themselves would have loved this to be true, the Russian and French complaints omitted a crucial fact. The Balkan 'Orient Express' section of the proposed Berlin-to-Baghdad line had a long section winding through Russophile Serbia, as the Central Powers would be reminded to their chagrin in 1914.



1. 'Mitteleuropa': from Hamburg to the Persian Gulf, 1912

start-up capital the BRC required to begin construction.²⁴ The Germans *were* trying to support the Sultan, perceiving him as their most indispensable ally in an increasingly hostile international environment. If Europe descended into a Great Power war, Austria-Hungary could do little more for her German ally than deflect some of Russia's strength on the eastern front, while Italy, Germany's only other European ally, could not do even that. The Ottoman Empire, by contrast, could threaten Russia's vulnerable Caucasian underbelly, along with Egypt and the Suez Canal, the strategic linchpin of the entire British Empire. It could only do this, however, if the Sultan's largely phantom authority over the distant provinces of his empire was buttressed by a great trunk railway to the Near East. If it was in Abdul Hamid's interest to ensure that the railway would serve Ottoman security needs, then it was in Germany's interest too. As Paul Rohrbach wrote in his classic pan-German primer, *Die Bagdadbahn*, 'Not a pfennig for a weak Turkey, but for a strong Turkey we can give everything!'²⁵

In building the Baghdad railway, then, the Germans were betting on the Sultan's political future. A railway connecting Constantinople to the Near East could easily be linked to the Hejaz railway (begun in 1901) and thus the holy cities of Medina and Mecca, helping to resurrect the Sultan's authority as Caliph of Sunni Islam and bring his restive Kurdish and Arab subjects back into the imperial fold.*²⁶ Abdul Hamid's brand of resurgent Islam also had great potential, from the German perspective, for stirring up seditious sentiments among the Muslim subjects of Britain and France. Pan-Islam, spreading eastwards on the Baghdad railway, could be Germany's ticket to world power.

Were the Sultan's precarious hold on his empire to falter, however, the German hand might turn out to be a busted flush. The more closely German diplomats, spies and railway engineers tied their fortunes to Abdul Hamid's reactionary regime, the greater the risk they would burn their bridges with everyone else in the empire, from political

* Unlike the Baghdad railway, the Hejaz line (which ran from Damascus to Medina) was directly financed to the tune of 75 million gold francs by subscription from Muslims around the world, as it would directly aid hajj pilgrims. Still, like the Baghdad line, it was mostly built by Germans, including head engineer Heinrich August Meissner.

reformers and go-ahead army officers to Jews and Christian minorities. The Armenians were particularly hostile to Abdul Hamid following the massacres, both spontaneous and organized, which had followed an Armenian uprising in Constantinople in 1896. Thousands of Armenians lived in south-eastern Anatolian districts through which the Baghdad railway would pass en route to Mesopotamia and their skills as mechanics, blacksmiths, metalworkers and artisans would be desperately needed. Then there were Kurds, Arabs, Greeks and Levantine Christians, none of whom took a kind view of Germany's cultivation of the Sultan.

Nor would the Sultan himself look kindly on his German benefactors if their promises were not fulfilled. As progress on the railway inevitably slowed after the first flatlands were forded, the strategic partnership between Berlin and the Porte was engulfed in acrimony. As Turkish officials complained to Hugo Grothe of the German-Anatolian Society, the Germans had 'given new meaning to the Turkish expression "yavaş yavaş"' ('slowly but surely').²⁷ By 1905, when construction ground to a halt, the BRC had finished barely 200 kilometres, or less than one tenth of the distance to Basra. Rather than a railway to Baghdad, the Germans had built a line to Bulgurlu, a town so small it is no longer a stop on the Anatolian express. For this 'railway to nowhere' the Ottoman government had borrowed 54 million francs, payable at 4 per cent annual interest over ninety-eight years, in order to meet the BRC's kilometric revenue guarantees. It was hefty bill for an empire in financial receivership – and would burden Turkish taxpayers for decades.

To the Germans financing and building the railway, of course, matters looked considerably different. The BRC, aided by German companies like Philipp Holzmann Construction, had built a smoothly functioning railway across the arid wastes of Anatolia, with German steel and engineering skill, to state-of-the-art specifications (the tracks were Prussian type 7).²⁸ True, progress had stalled after the line reached Bulgurlu, but this was largely due to the Sultan's insistence that construction proceed in stages, one section at a time from west to east, to ensure that none of his restive subjects south-east of the Taurus and Amanus mountains benefited prematurely from the railway's construction. Without being allowed to build a line across the more

commercially viable Mediterranean plains, there was no way the BRC could hope to recoup the colossal outlays needed to begin blasting and tunnelling the Taurus mountains. Revenue from the first 200-kilometre section, meanwhile, had proved disappointing. Before the through line was finished, there was little advantage for passengers or freight traffic in travelling from Konya to Bulgurlu by train, only to be forced back on to the caravan route for the mountains. This left the BRC wholly dependent on the Sultan's kilometric guarantees (11,000 francs per finished kilometre, or 4,500 per kilometre in sections under construction) to pay down railway bonds. Profits, even on a flat section of the railway the Germans had finished under cost and ahead of schedule, had simply not materialized. Were the BRC to begin serious work on the Taurus section of the railway, the prospect of profit would become nothing more than a fevered fantasy.

In a sense, the German team was right back where it started. Having proved themselves unable to finance the railway alone,* the Germans would need to raise substantially the kilometric guarantees the BRC demanded of the beleaguered Ottoman government, which by 1906 was again facing bankruptcy. This would necessitate substantial rises in Ottoman tax and customs duties, which could only be approved by the Great Powers – not only the French, who dominated the Ottoman Public Debt Administration, but Russia and Great Britain too. In the diplomacy surrounding the Baghdad concessions of 1899 and 1903, Germany had been able to count on London's tacit support, or at least indifference. But in 1904 Britain had reached a historic *Entente Cordiale* with France. Meanwhile, the Liberal landslide of December 1905 would inaugurate an era of outright Russophilia in Downing Street. Whereas Tory statesmen like Benjamin Disraeli and Lord Salisbury had favoured propping up the Ottomans to block any threat of a Russian advance, the new Liberal Prime Minister Herbert Asquith and Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey,

* Although the French-controlled *Banque Impériale Ottomane* held a significant chunk of BRC stock, the French government had refused to give official listing on the Paris bourse to the railway bonds floated in 1903, which had seriously hampered efforts to raise capital. The British government, too, had refused to underwrite bond issues in the City of London. So the BRC bonds had mostly been sold to German banks.

owing to both the Liberal tradition of favouring Russia over 'barbarous' Turkey and to the mounting German threat, were keen to bury the hatchet with Britain's Great Game rival. If the Germans wanted to secure international financing for the crucial mountain stages of the Baghdad railway, Berlin, cornered by the budding new tripartite Entente, would have to beg.

Luckily, negotiations over raising the Ottoman customs rates had begun earlier in 1905, before the Liberal takeover in London signalled the coming diplomatic revolution. Sultan Abdul Hamid had then proposed raising the duty on imports entering Ottoman ports from 8 to 11 per cent. After a year of agonizing negotiations, the powers agreed, but not before attaching political conditions, including expensive new reforms and restrictions on the use of customs revenue increases to pay the BRC's kilometric revenue guarantees. The increase, moreover, would not kick in until July 1907, by which time construction on the Baghdad line would have been halted for three years.²⁹ While helping to keep the Sultan's myriad creditors at bay for a time, the customs deal would do little to kick-start construction on the railway that Abdul Hamid so desperately needed to strengthen his empire. And the financial riders attached made it perfectly clear that the Entente powers had no desire to help him do so.

Interestingly, it was the Russian government, which had never signed off on any of the earlier Baghdad concessions, which petitioned Germany first over a new Baghdad railway convention. Russian Foreign Minister Alexander Isvolsky proposed a straight-up imperial bargain while visiting Berlin in October 1906. Russia would 'allow' construction of the Baghdad railway, he told German State Secretary Baron von Schoen, in exchange for German recognition of Russian interests in Persia, and a promise that Germany would never build rail or telegraph lines there.³⁰

It was a curious proposal. As interpreted by Marschall, German Ambassador to the Porte, Russia was merely up to her old dirty tricks. To all appearances, Russian industrialists had no plans of their own to build many railways in Persia, and certainly not in Asiatic Turkey. Isvolsky's demand that Germany desist from developing Persia's minuscule rail network was consistent, Marschall believed, with 'the general tendency of Russia's entire policy towards the Orient, to

stymie the Islamic countries in their economic development and in this way to exacerbate their political and military weakness'. Berlin, by contrast, wanted to strengthen the Ottoman Empire's communications, and shore up the Sultan's political and spiritual authority in the process. Thus Germany, Marschall advised Chancellor von Bülow in March 1907, must not agree to Russia's veto on Persian rail development, which would 'completely destroy our entire freedom of action', along with Germany's reputation as friend and patron of the Muslim world.³¹ Considering the result of Russia's campaign for recognition of its Persian sphere of influence – the Anglo-Russian Convention signed just four months later, which cynically divided Persia into zones of influence, to guarantee the British position in India and the Russians' in Central Asia – Marschall's warning was prescient.

The solidification of the Triple Entente in 1907 only hardened German resolve to go it alone in financing the Baghdad railway. Now that the hostile Russians seemed to have a veto over both French and British policy, there was little hope of moving major new railway bond issues in Paris and London. Sultan Abdul Hamid also shared Marschall's frustrations with Entente machinations, and the two men began negotiating their own counter-Entente accord. Although the terms of the new BRC concession were not finalized until 2 June 1908, Marschall and Abdul Hamid seem to have reached an oral agreement earlier that winter, in which the Sultan promised that 'he would make sufficient guarantees available for the continuation of the Baghdad railway'.³² The higher customs duties, to the chagrin of the Entente powers, had shored up the Ottoman government's financial position enough that the Sultan could float his own Baghdad railway bonds, pledging to their future repayment any revenue surpluses turned over to his government by the Public Debt Administration. If these surpluses did not materialize, the Sultan promised to make up the gap with local taxes, like the livestock levy on cattle in provinces through which the railway passed, such as Konya, Adana and Aleppo.³³

However the kilometric guarantees would be paid, the important thing was that construction could finally resume. In exchange for the Sultan's financial pledges, the BRC had vowed to get to work within three months. Urged on by Marschall and led by a brilliant German railway expert, Ernst Mackensen, the BRC moved even faster than this.

By late June, German engineers had begun surveying the Taurus mountains from both directions, the northern team setting up shop at Ereğli and the southern unit at Adana. There were no more concerns about building multiple sections simultaneously: the Sultan had expressly demanded that the Germans work as quickly as possible.³⁴

It was a heady time in Anatolia, with the strategic partnership between Kaiser Wilhelm and Abdul Hamid finally bearing fruit. With both sovereigns threatened by diplomatic encirclement, there was a hint of menace in the air which brought urgency to the relationship. Haydarpasha station, now rising ominously on the Asian shore of the Bosphorus, embodied the new potency of the partnership between Berlin and the Porte. Without the help of the other powers, Germany and the Ottoman Empire would build the railway of the world's dreams, linking together East and West, Europe and the Orient, and reawakening the Islamic world from its long economic sleep. The Germans had bet the farm on the Sultan just as everyone else in the world was writing him off, and Abdul Hamid was eager to reward their loyalty. It was a brilliant move, but a risky one. As with so many of history's great gambits, the prize was just beginning to fall into Germany's grasp when fate snatched it rudely away.

3

Young Turks and Old Caliphs

With the triumph of Liberal Ideas in Turkey the great moral influence which Constantinople possesses over Islam at large is destined to assume an intellectual character. Such an influence would then serve as a powerful agent of reconciliation between East and West.

Prince Sabahaddin, August 1906¹

Since the [failed counter-revolutionary coup] of 13 April [1909] the [Young Turks] have become more careful. Women's emancipation is being put to the side, and once again Sharia law is spoken of. Nevertheless strict Muslims regard the whole [CUP] regime with deep mistrust, if not with outright hostility.

Baron Marschall, October 1909²

The generous early returns Germany had received from its gamble on Abdul Hamid were largely owing to the Sultan's precarious perch on his throne. Palace intrigue was nothing new in a monarchy which depended on the peculiar institution of the *harem* to propagate the royal bloodline: in its earliest days newly crowned Sultans had routinely put their brothers to death to prevent succession struggles. In later, ostensibly more humane times, would-be heirs to the throne (or deposed Sultans) were instead confined to the *kafes*, a kind of gilded cage where many went mad in solitary confinement. Although Abdul Hamid was fortunate enough to escape these fates, his troubled reign was literally born of inner-palace bloodshed in 1876. After replacing the long-serving Abdul Aziz as Sultan earlier that year, Abdul Hamid's

older brother Murad V had suffered a nervous breakdown. He had cause: the deposed Abdul Aziz had (reportedly) killed himself,* whereupon an army captain close to the martyred Sultan went on murderous rampage inside a Cabinet meeting, killing the War Minister, among others. One can hardly blame Abdul Hamid for his paranoia, considering the fate of his predecessors. It did not help that attempts to depose him by force came close to succeeding in both 1878 and 1896.

For understandable reasons, Abdul Hamid's government devoted a great deal of its energy to assuring the sovereign's physical survival. Refusing to live at Dolmabahçe palace because of its unpleasant associations with the ghoulishly martyred Abdul Aziz, the new Sultan constructed a veritable fortress at Yıldız, on a rise overlooking Dolmabahçe and the Bosphorus (although significantly, below the towering new imperial German Embassy atop the higher hill at Taksim, opened in December 1877). On the express instructions of the new Sultan, Yıldız had been surrounded by two encircling walls, the second directly abutting the barracks of the Ottoman Imperial Guard, 7,000 strong. As if preparing for a siege, Abdul Hamid had installed inside the fortified Yıldız complex 'a farm, a small artificial lake, stables, workshops, a menagerie, and an aviary'.³

If the Sultan sometimes seemed to conflate his own fate with that of his empire, he had good reasons for doing so. It was not simply that there were, indisputably, active plots against his life and throne; there were also plots afoot to dismantle the Ottoman Empire, and to a striking extent these could be dated to 1876, the date of Abdul Hamid's accession. In that fateful year, the empire had faced bankruptcy, insurrections in Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro and Bulgaria, and the threat of a Russian invasion piggybacking on the southern Slav revolts – which indeed transpired the following April. In Abdul Hamid's first year in power, the Ottoman Empire, long ailing, seemed to be on its death-bed. That both Sultan and empire survived this crisis together only reinforced Abdul Hamid's belief that his own fate was intertwined with that of the House of Osman.

* By slashing his wrists – both of them, which may have been a difficult trick, the second wrist cut by a knife-wielding hand already incapacitated by the first thrust.

More to the political point, because both an Ottoman constitution and parliament had been inaugurated in winter 1876–7, while the powers were meeting in Constantinople to decide the fate of the empire with the Balkans in rebellion and the Russians threatening, Abdul Hamid associated Western-style political reform with imperial humiliation. He was not entirely wrong to do so: previous bouts of Ottoman liberalism had all coincided with moments of Turkish weakness, from the suppression of the reactionary Janissary corps in 1826 (during the final throes of the Greek war of independence), to the launch of the Tanzimat reforms in 1839 (after the Egyptian Muhammad Ali's victory over the Ottoman army at Nezib), to the Imperial Rescript of 1856, which followed the empire's embarrassing delivery from Russian invasion by her British and French Crimean War allies. Abdul Hamid, by contrast, used the occasion of a damaging armistice with Russia in February 1878 to prorogue the new parliament, as if to declare Ottoman independence from European political tutelage.*⁴

The Sultan's suspicions about liberal reform were only reinforced by the larger trends in European diplomacy. Since the promulgation of the Rescript of the Rose Bower in 1839, which kicked off the Tanzimat, Ottoman Westernizers had looked to Paris and London for inspiration. But the loss of French face in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 had taken the bloom off the liberal rose. The discrediting of liberalism in Abdul Hamid's mind was completed by the French occupation of Ottoman Tunisia in 1881 and the British occupation of Egypt by the archetypically Liberal Gladstone government in 1882.⁵ German prestige, by contrast, was rising steadily, and the Kaiserreich, particularly after the ascension of Wilhelm II in 1888, was anything but liberal. Metternich's Holy Alliance of the conservative Eastern Emperors may have been killed off by the Crimean War (when Austria had split with Russia), but its spirit lived on in Potsdam.

The various steps in the Kaiser's progressive courtship of Abdul Hamid seemed almost uncannily timed to poke a stick in the eye of Ottoman liberals. It was in 1889, the year Wilhelm sang the Sultan's praises while touring Constantinople, that the first serious 'Young Turk'

* During the framing of the constitution in 1876–7, Abdul Hamid had cleverly inserted a clause giving the Sultan the 'sacred right' to dissolve parliament: so his action was, technically, legal.

committee, the İttihad-ı Osmanî Cemiyeti (Society of Ottoman Unity), was formed at the empire's Military Medical College in Gülhane. In the same year, Ahmed Rıza, the former director of state education in Bursa, arrived in Paris to galvanize Ottoman exiles against the despotism of Abdul Hamid. Rıza's journal *Meşveret*, published in Paris and smuggled into Constantinople via the foreign post offices, would soon christen the name for the opposition movement: İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti, or Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). In September 1896, on the heels of a short-lived Armenian rebellion and the subsequent massacres which turned Abdul Hamid into the 'Bloody Sultan' of legend, the CUP's Constantinople branch, working with the Armenian revolutionary Dashnaksutiun committee (the 'Dashnaks'), prepared an opportunistic *coup d'état*. Betrayed by government informers who had penetrated the movement, the plot was thoroughly snuffed out, with 350 CUP conspirators in the army and civil service arrested or exiled to distant provinces. Yet again Ottoman weakness had given impetus to liberal reform, and yet again Abdul Hamid had proven too wily an opponent. Right on cue, Kaiser Wilhelm now wrote his famous birthday greeting to the Sultan, congratulating Abdul Hamid on another year of imperial survival just as most Europeans were mourning his repression of Armenians and liberal reformers alike. 'Bloody Sultan' or not, Abdul Hamid was now confident of the Kaiser's support.⁶

In much the same manner, the Baghdad railway concession of 1899, following on the heels of the Kaiser's oriental grand tour the previous year, coincided almost exactly with the recuperation of the Young Turk movement from its apparent eclipse three years previously. Just as the Deutsche Bank negotiators were applying the finishing touches to an ambitious railway deal designed to strengthen the Sultan's authority over his fractious subjects that December, Abdul Hamid's half-brother, Damad Mahmud Pasha, fled to Paris with his sons Sabahaddin and Lütfullah, where they would team up with Ahmed Rıza.* At once, the introduction of three possible imperial pretenders transformed the CUP

* Damad Mahmud Celâleddin Pasha, the grandson of Sultan Mahmud II, was not only a prince of the blood in the Ottoman line and half-brother to the Sultan: he was also married to Abdul Hamid's sister. His departure on 14 December 1899 (just nine days before the Baghdad railway concession was given to the German team) was thus a very serious matter for the Ottoman government.

from a beleaguered outfit of angry exiles into a serious factor in international politics. The Ottoman pretender sent a note to the British government almost immediately after arriving in Paris, asking for London's backing of his opposition movement (there was no reply).⁷ Mahmud, Sabahaddin and Lütfullah also wrote direct appeals to Wilhelm II, hoping the Kaiser might lean on his friend Abdul Hamid to restore the Constitution of 1876 (the answer, unsurprisingly, was no).⁸ The Kaiser had made his bet on the Sultan, and would stick with him. European and Ottoman liberals who dreamed of toppling the 'Bloody Sultan', however, now had their own cards to play.

The 'Damad Mahmud affair' furnished a dry run of the international propaganda wars which would increasingly poison Great Power politics in the new century. On the one side, there was 'respectable opinion', mainly British- and French-inflected, which predictably lined up behind Mahmud and his sons. 'Yes, it is true that I fled from my country,' the Sultan's brother-in-law told a sympathetic reporter from *Le Matin* in January 1900, 'because the whole [Ottoman] empire is a prison. Abdul Hamid keeps us all in prison, from [deposed] Sultan Murad V to the lowliest member of the *ulema* in Istanbul.' Mahmud spoke even more freely to the London *Standard*, informing British sympathizers that the wicked despot of Constantinople had 'annihilated thousands of human beings – Muslims and Christians'. The German press, by contrast, taking its cues from the Kaiser's pro-Hamidian *Orientpolitik*, smeared Mahmud at every opportunity. *Die Post* suggested the Ottoman pretender was fronting for the Rechnitzer group, embittered after losing out on the Baghdad railway concession.*⁹ *Neue Preussische Zeitung* and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* dismissed Mahmud as an out-and-out English spy. Or perhaps, suggested *Der Bund* with a sneer, this wayward son of the Ottoman dynasty was blackmailing the Sultan in order to increase his allowance, from 3 to 5 million Swiss francs.¹⁰ Long before the Anglo-French Entente Cordiale formalized the anti-German alliance in 1904, Europe's press barons (many directly subsidized by their governments) had their parts in the drama down pat.

* This may have been true. Damad Mahmud indeed offered to help the British gain concessions in the Ottoman Empire in exchange for their help in overthrowing Abdul Hamid. It is likely this would have included a renewed Rechnitzer bid on the Baghdad railway.

When the diplomats and spies threw their hats in the ring, the international row over the Young Turks grew nastier still. Even before Mahmud and his sons had left Constantinople, the German government had been spreading rumours about assassination plots being hatched in Europe against Abdul Hamid. Geneva, then as today an international playground of rich and well-connected exiles, was second only to Paris as a Young Turk refuge. Damad Mahmud himself had set up shop there, injecting a great deal of his fortune into Young Turk propaganda. Because so much CUP literature smuggled into Constantinople was being printed in Geneva, German insinuations about conspiracies against the Sultan were potentially embarrassing to the Swiss authorities if anything did happen to Abdul Hamid. Quietly, the Swiss Ambassador in Berlin assured German State Secretary Bülow that his government 'would do everything possible to assure that no plot (*Attentat*) against the Sultan or his government could be organized from Geneva'.¹¹

With a characteristic mixture of boldness and blundering, the Germans seem to have taken this promise as a blanket invitation to crack down on Young Turk plotters in Switzerland. Not long after Mahmud and his sons fled Constantinople in winter 1899–1900, Phillip von Richthofen, a shadowy associate of Baron Oppenheim, surfaced in Geneva. Curiously, Richthofen signed his correspondence as the 'Consul-General of the Ottoman Empire for Switzerland', despite his rather obvious Germanic name and title (like Oppenheim, Richthofen called himself *Freiherr* or 'Baron', although the origin of his title is unclear), and despite the fact that there was already another Ottoman Consul in Switzerland. Richthofen was almost certainly working for German intelligence, which furnished him with extremely detailed reports on the movements of Young Turk agitators in Europe. In his guise as 'Ottoman Consul' in Geneva, Richthofen forwarded these reports on to Munir Bey, Abdul Hamid's Ambassador in Paris – until, that is, Richthofen was outed as an imposter by the Swiss police, to the delight of the Young Turks and their supporters in the Western press.¹²

In defence of the Germans, it must be said that many CUP leaders were all but begging to be spied upon. It was not only Mahmud and his sons who wrote openly to the Kaiser about their plans to overthrow Abdul Hamid. So, too, did Young Turk activists like Ahmed Rıza, who had addressed a passionate appeal to Wilhelm in November 1898.

'You have already seen our beautiful country,' Rıza wrote to the Kaiser on the occasion of his visits to Jerusalem and Damascus, but asked him also to reflect on the 'sad condition of the Ottoman Empire ... its ruins and misery'. You must, Rıza enjoined Wilhelm, 'dare to listen to the people; hear their voices, as once Moses and Muhammad heard the voice of God in these parts'.¹³ With touching naïveté, Rıza continued sending copies of *Meşveret* to the German Foreign Office, hoping they might be passed on to the Kaiser so as to enlighten him about the true state of affairs under the despotic Sultan. Instead, the Wilhelmstrasse passed along Rıza's missives against Abdul Hamid to – Abdul Hamid.¹⁴

As the Young Turk movement in Europe gathered steam, German efforts to quash it grew more desperate. Spying for the Sultan took on a self-perpetuating quality: the more intelligence on CUP conspiracies reached Abdul Hamid's ears, the more terrified he became, which led him to demand yet more intelligence. Thus in August 1905, a single revolutionary pamphlet occasioned a full-blown investigation, in which the Wilhelmstrasse enlisted the regular German police. 'The Sultan would be most grateful to the German Imperial Government,' Marschall's deputy wrote from the Embassy summer residence at Therapia, 'if the police authorities in Munich could ... [inform him] from which circles (workers, students, Young Turks, Armenians, Macedonians) the pamphlet ... could have originated', as well as 'which individuals and leaders it has reached'. Goaded on by State Secretary Bülow, the Munich authorities duly complied.¹⁵

German surveillance of the Ottoman pretenders was even more thorough. Prince Sabahaddin, who had replaced Ahmed Rıza as the public face of the CUP organization in Paris, sought an audience with Pope Pius X in March 1906, ostensibly on behalf of the official Ottoman heir apparent Mehmed Reshad, to discuss relations between the Vatican and the Porte and the prospects for reform, particularly relating to the status of Catholic minorities in the Ottoman Empire. After long and tortuous negotiations over protocol, it was agreed that the Ottoman prince would be personally presented to the Pope by the Vatican Secretary of State on the strict condition that no one learn of the meeting. If news leaked out, it could be embarrassing to the Vatican, which would appear to be interfering in Ottoman religious affairs. Even worse, however, would be the damage done to Sabahaddin's

reputation among the Muslim faithful, if it seemed he was intriguing with the prelate of Rome. Even the Young Turks might object to such brazen cynicism. Naturally, the German Ambassador in Rome made sure to pass on everything he knew about Sabahaddin's courting of the Pope to State Secretary Bülow, to be forwarded on to Abdul Hamid.¹⁶ The Sultan, in turn, seems to have leaked the Germans' intelligence on the Vatican meeting to his spies in the Young Turk movement (or encouraged the Germans themselves to do so). Before long, Prince Sabahaddin was accused by rivals in the Paris CUP of 'taking money from the Pope'.^{*17}

Like his father Mahmud and his rival Ahmed Rıza, Sabahaddin was an easy mark for the Germans. Despite numerous rebuffs, the Ottoman prince continued to seek an audience with the German Emperor, as he did, yet again, after meeting the Pope. Not surprisingly, the German Embassy in Rome declined his visa request, on direct orders from State Secretary Bülow in Berlin (the grounds were that 'the Porte [i.e. Sultan Abdul Hamid] is pursuing the named individual as a revolutionary dangerous to the State').¹⁸ Whereas many of Sabahaddin's CUP and Armenian co-conspirators took pains to conceal their authorship of anti-Hamidian literature, the Prince-pretender openly addressed his revolutionary screeds to European chancelleries, inviting them to intervene in the Ottoman Empire to promote minority rights.¹⁹ Sabahaddin wore sedition on his sleeve.

Succession controversies, of course, were nothing new in European politics. Still, there was something fundamentally different about the conspiracies against Abdul Hamid. Prince Sabahaddin was not simply staking a claim to a disputed throne, in the manner of European royal houses trying to one-up each other in territorial horse-trading. He was setting himself up as a vehicle for reforming the Ottoman Empire – and with it, the entire Islamic world. As Sabahaddin wrote to British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey from Paris in August 1906,

* The initial accusation was made by Ali Haydar Midhat of the Paris branch of the CUP. It is unclear what Midhat's source was, but as the only extant reports of this meeting are in the archives of the German Foreign Office (and these are copious), the likeliest explanation is that either the Germans themselves leaked the story, or else Sultan Abdul Hamid did after learning of it from the Germans. The Vatican, for its part, has always stringently denied that the Sabahaddin meeting took place.

Constantinople was still 'the seat of the Caliphate', with supreme authority over (Sunni) Islam. Thus, 'with the triumph of Liberal Ideas in Turkey', Sabahaddin promised Grey, 'the great moral influence which Constantinople possesses over Islam at large is destined to assume an intellectual character. Such an influence would then serve as a powerful agent of reconciliation between East and West.' Unlike Abdul Hamid, he and his Young Turk allies possessed 'an intellectual outlook which is quite up to date': they were ready 'to adopt the ideas of Western civilization'.²⁰

Music to the ears of Western liberals, Prince Sabahaddin's vision of modernizing the Caliphate on Western lines was unlikely to inspire much of a following in the Muslim world. His letter to Grey was published just as the Aqaba conflict was reaching fever pitch, whipping up Islamic passions from Constantinople to Cairo, where Egyptian nationalists took up the Sultan's claim to the Sinai peninsula (as against that of British Egypt). Confronting the spectre of pan-Islam veering dangerously close to the great imperial chokepoint at the Suez Canal, British diplomats were hardly going to back an Ottoman imperial pretender already notorious for his support of Christian minorities – and reputed to be intriguing with the Pope. Indulging Prince Sabahaddin's liberalism was a luxury the British could ill afford.

Paradoxically, the weaker Sultan Abdul Hamid's hold on his tottering empire appeared, the more successful was his promotion of pan-Islam, which is to say, his claim to be Caliph of the global *umma* of believers.²¹ Attempts by the powers to pry loose Ottoman territory, no less than periodic threats against the Sultan's life and throne, won Abdul Hamid the sympathies of the entire Islamic world. The appearance of British bullying of the Sultan-Caliph was bound to stir up Muslim rage, whatever the facts on the ground. In the case of the Aqaba border dispute, Lord Cromer was actually supporting Egypt's claim on the Sinai: and yet Egyptian nationalists emphatically took Turkey's position. So, too, did British Indian Muslims, who discovered a newfound interest in the troubles of the Ottoman Sultan-Caliph after making their hajj in late 1906. It mattered little that these pilgrims travelled to Mecca, via British ports, on British-owned vessels, protected by the British navy: Abdul Hamid was their man, and Lord Cromer the villain.²²

Short of withdrawing from Egypt entirely, there was little London could do to dispel the widespread impression among Muslims that Abdul Hamid was a victim of British imperialism. Embracing the Young Turks would only make things worse, as they were, arguably, the most dangerous enemy of the Sultan-Caliph, and thus implicitly anti-Islamic in the eyes of the global *ulema*. What men like Lord Cromer needed was a way of somehow detaching the Caliphate from the Ottoman throne. As a leader-writer for the pro-British *Egyptian Gazette* intoned in May 1906, 'the Sultan, no doubt, likes to pretend that when he is touched all Islam is wounded. We must try and see if we cannot correct this artfully propagated delusion.' Perhaps, the propagandist craftily suggested, Britain's Muslim subjects could be gently reminded that 'it is Mecca, not Constantinople, which is the centre of the Muslim faith. It is towards the Kaabah, not towards the St Sophia, that the Moslem turns his eyes as he prays.'²³ Throughout 1906 and 1907, the *Gazette* ran a whole series of articles by Muslim jurists mocking Sultan Abdul Hamid's claim to be Caliph.²⁴ Clearly, the British were already thinking along the lines of installing a new, Mecca-based Caliph, nearly a decade before Kitchener famously proposed the idea in the first winter of the Great War.²⁵

By long-standing tradition, the title of Caliph, or spiritual successor of the Prophet Muhammad, was bestowed on the most powerful sovereign in the Islamic world, who had the honour of 'protecting' the holy places. Since the conquest of Arabia and Egypt by Sultan Selim 'the Grim' in 1517, the Ottomans had a good claim on the title, enforced (usually) by a standing military garrison at Mecca itself. By the early twentieth century, however, Turkish authority in the entire region of the Hejaz, still largely Bedouin country, was fragile: this is why Abdul Hamid was building a railway there. So long as the Germans could build him the rail lines he needed to restore his authority in the Hejaz, Abdul Hamid's claim to be the protector of the holy places of Islam would be safe. If the Sultan were toppled from his throne, however, then whichever Arabian pretender had the powerful British navy at his back – protecting passage for hajj pilgrims coming in from Africa and Asia – might have a fighting chance to take over the Caliphate.

The likeliest candidate to replace the Sultan as Caliph was Sherif Ali Abdullah Pasha of Mecca (the future King Hussein, famous father of T. E. Lawrence's friend Faisal, would not assume this office until 1908). In theory, the Sherifs of Mecca, born of the 'Banu Hashim' or 'Hashemite' dynasty, could claim direct descent by blood from Muhammad's own tribe, the Koreish, via the Prophet's grandson, al-Hassan ibn Ali. According to most Muslim Jurists, this gave the ruler of Mecca a much better legal claim on the Caliphate than the Ottomans – although it was moot in practice, because the Sherifs had nearly always recognized the Sultan's political authority, which is to say his superior army.²⁶

The Sherifiate was a peculiar institution, which had evolved to fill the power vacuum left in Arabia as the seat of Islamic power moved from Mecca to Damascus (until AD 750), Baghdad (until the Mongol sack of 1258), Cairo (until 1517), and then Ottoman Constantinople. The root of the problem was that no Muslim sovereign worth his salt had ever wanted to actually *live* in Mecca, in the brutal desert climate of the Hejaz, surrounded by marauding Bedouin tribesmen. In practice the Sherifiate was a glorified protection racket, which for nearly a thousand years had exploited its monopoly over Mecca to shake down hajj pilgrims foolish enough to arrive in the Hejaz without armed escort. Although the Sherif, in military terms, was never a match for the Egyptian Mamelukes or Ottoman Janissaries – even at their strongest Sherifian forces usually consisted of only 'a few hundred slaves, the same number of mercenaries, and ... a few Bedouin clans' – the Sultans had preferred to leave well enough alone in the Hejaz, so long as the Sherif continued toasting them as 'Caliph' in official Mecca prayers, which confirmed their supremacy over all other Muslim princes.²⁷

The Ottoman claim on the Caliphate, therefore, rested precariously on military supremacy in Arabia. Not that the Sherifian hold on Mecca was any stronger: in fact the Wahhabi forces of the Saud clan had dislodged the Hashemites from the holy cities in 1802. Mecca had been reconquered from the Wahhabis in 1813, not by the Sherifs, nor the Ottoman army, but by the forces of the reformist Egyptian Khedive, Muhammad Ali. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Sherifs had openly flouted Ottoman power, until the Porte finally figured out how to bring them to heel: giving Hashemite pretenders

(and deposed Sherifs) palaces on the Bosphorus, in the 'gilded cage' manner of the *kafes*.*

The problem with Britain's courting of the Mecca Sherifs, then, was not necessarily that the Ottoman hold on the Caliphate was inviolable, but that they may have been backing the wrong horse in the Hejaz. By the early twentieth century, the Sherifiate was notoriously corrupt, with various Hashemite pretenders making annual reverse pilgrimages of their own to sample the urban delights of Cairo and Constantinople.²⁸ It was this sort of worldly temptation which had first given the Sherifs leverage over the Caliphate, as Muslim sovereigns preferred cosmopolitan capitals to the Hejaz desert; and it was now weakening the Sherifiate itself.[†] Hashemite corruption played right into the hands of Ibn Saud, whose purist Wahhabi followers were again making waves in central Arabia, winning battle after battle against the Shammar Bedouins of Ibn Rashid, and threatening the Hashemite hold on the Hejaz as well. Whether or not officials in London understood all this, the Cairo residency was game enough to play both sides. As Oppenheim complained to Berlin as early as April 1905, the perfidious British were subsidizing both the Sherif and Ibn Saud, which gave them no less than two possible candidates for a new Caliphate detached from the Ottoman throne.²⁹

The Germans, of course, had their own horse in the race, and Abdul Hamid was still the favourite. British attempts to discredit the Sultan's claim on the Caliphate were a sign of fear. As the Baron Oppenheim wrote to Bülow (now Chancellor) from Cairo in May 1908, the 'detachment of the Caliphate from the Turkish Sultanate ... and the weakening of the Ottoman Empire' had turned into the overriding goal of 'British *Orientpolitik*'. The reason was easy to grasp: Britain ruled over roughly 100 million Muslim subjects, nearly all Sunnis, in a strategic arc stretching from Nigeria to Egypt, the Gulf States and the Indian subcontinent.

* Sherif Ali Abdullah Pasha, for example, was pensioned off in style in Constantinople after being deposed in 1908.

† Much as today the notorious corruption of the oil-rich Saudi royals inspires many Wahhabi critics to support Saudi pretenders like the ascetic Osama Bin Laden.

In the case of a general European war, these Sunnis would, it was assumed, inevitably 'flock to the banner of the moral leader [of Islam], the Sultan-Caliph', which would all but 'guarantee a general uprising of Mohammedans' in England's colonies. This is why Abdul Hamid was Britain's 'most dangerous enemy', whom Germany should support with all her power – for example, by speeding up construction on the Baghdad railway (as if taking dictation, the Deutsche Bank team signed the deal to begin blasting the Taurus mountains exactly one week after Oppenheim wrote this letter).³⁰

There was something absurd about this shadow-boxing between two Christian powers over the Caliphate, an ancient Islamic institution most educated Muslims themselves no longer took very seriously. Until Sultan Abdul Hamid had tried to resuscitate pan-Islam in recent decades, most Turkish sovereigns had rather downplayed the title of Caliph, using it more in dealings with 'infidel' states than with other Muslim sovereigns who might have been offended by the suggestion of superiority inherent in the office. European diplomats tended to regard the Caliph as a sort of Pope – that is, a spiritual, not political, leader. Their Turkish counterparts were happy to entertain this entirely false notion of the Caliphate, believing it to be largely harmless.³¹

Pumped up by the British and German propaganda machines, however, the idea of the Caliphate may not have been harmless any longer. Buoyed by the Aqaba border crisis, the Germans' pro-Hamidian pan-Islamism had frightened the British into subsidizing Wahhabism and the Sherifiate of Mecca, which in turn had convinced the Germans that they needed to try still harder to strengthen the Ottoman Sultan-Caliph's hold on his far-flung subjects. It was like a race to the reactionary bottom, to see which 'infidel' power could conjure up the purist strain of fundamentalist Islam.

Lost in the crossfire, of course, were the Sultan's Muslim subjects, who had not been consulted as to whether they wanted to live under the strict Sharia law of a revived Caliphate, whether originating from Constantinople, Mecca or the puritanical Wahhabi heartland of the Nejd. Even more lost were the non-Islamic minorities of the Ottoman Empire, who in some areas (like European Turkey, including Constantinople) were numerically equal to or even outnumbered

the Muslims.* Hard as it is to imagine today following the modern demographic explosion in the Middle East, in 1900 the Sultan ruled over fewer than twenty million subjects in the entire Ottoman Empire, stretching from the Balkans to the Arabian desert sands, and of those roughly two-thirds were Muslims.^{†32} How strange it was, then, that the two greatest Christian powers in Europe were trying to outdo each other in their public embrace of unreformed, backwards-looking Islam. Stranger still, the Germans and British were fighting to resurrect the ancient Caliphate at a time when Young Turk reformers were themselves trying desperately to modernize the Ottoman Empire, making common cause with many beleaguered Christian minorities (particularly the Armenians) to do so.

Of the two imperial rivals, Berlin was better informed about the burgeoning CUP conspiracy of 1908 than London, mostly because of contacts with the Ottoman military dating back to the 1880s. The extent of German influence on the Turkish army has often been exaggerated, in part owing to the illustrious name of the first Prussian adviser hired by the Sultan in 1835, Moltke the Elder (whose fame dates not to his short-lived experience advising the Ottoman army, which he himself deemed to have been ineffectual, but to his role as mastermind of the Prussian victory over France in 1870–71).** Before the notorious Liman von Sanders-led mission of forty officers was dispatched to Turkey in winter 1913–14, there were never more than a handful

* In 1885, the population of Constantinople was officially counted at 873,565, of whom 384,410, or about 44 per cent, were Muslims. The Islamic population of the capital seems to have surpassed 50 per cent sometime around the turn of the century, such that by 1914 there were some 390,000 Christians and Jews out of 910,000 city residents (about 43 per cent). In Ottoman Europe, as late as 1911, the population of Jews, Orthodox and Catholic Christians was about 3.11 million out of 6.3 million total, almost exactly half.

† Ottoman demography is a highly contested subject, and after 1877 the numbers were in constant flux, as each successive Balkan and Caucasian war produced refugees – generally Christians leaving and Muslims arriving. In the most thorough pre-war census, completed in 1893, the empire's population was 17.4 million, of which 12.5 million were Muslims, or 70 per cent. By 1914, the proportion of Muslims, following the Balkan wars, was probably more than three-quarters, nearing 80 per cent.

** Moltke did write a book about his experiences in Turkey, which contains the memorable observation that 'a Turk will concede without hesitation that the Europeans are superior to his nation in science, skill, wealth, daring and strength, without its ever occurring to him that a Frank might therefore put himself on a par with a Muslim'.

of German military advisers in Turkey – usually no more than there were British officers advising the Ottoman navy. Nevertheless, German influence in the army was real, and it was the army which counted.

While exiles were getting most of the press attention – Ahmed Rıza and Prince Sabahadhin staged a grand reconciliation at a Paris CUP Congress in December 1907, with the Armenian Dashnaks also attending – it was the quiet spread of revolutionary ‘cells’ through the army in Turkey which mattered in the end. As von der Goltz Pasha wrote to Kaiser Wilhelm II on 11 December 1907, ‘feelings of Turkish nationalism have grown astonishingly and found supporters ... there is no doubt that the military expects various radical improvements in the country’. Presciently, von der Goltz pointed to the Third Army in Macedonia as a potential danger zone for Sultan Abdul Hamid.³³ Still, despite having slightly better intelligence on the army, the Germans were blindsided just like everyone else by anti-Hamidian mutinies in the Second and Third Armies which, compounded by a wave of demonstrations in the capital, at last forced the autocratic Sultan to reinstate the constitution and call for parliamentary elections on 23 July 1908. Considering how poor and muddled most of the historical literature on this so-called ‘Young Turk revolution’ remains, it should not be surprising that European chancelleries were taken by surprise at the time.³⁴ The German reading of events was not helped by the fact that Germany’s powerful Ambassador, Baron Marschall, was on leave from early June to late August 1908, missing the entire revolution. Taking the reins in his absence was Alfred von Kiderlen-Wächter, an experienced but unimaginative diplomat who wrote to Chancellor Bülow on 10 July 1908, as the army mutiny was beginning to spread across Macedonia and Thrace, that he could ‘hardly believe, that these [Young Turk] activists are very numerous, still less, that they constitute a direct danger [to the throne]’.³⁵

The British did not do much better. In the sense that London’s relationship with the Porte was less intimate than Berlin’s, the lack of good British intelligence on the state of affairs in the Ottoman army is understandable. But the British misreading of the Young Turks is still an instructive episode in the annals of modern diplomacy, because it was such a colossal missed opportunity. Just as repeated appeals for British support from Damad Mahmud and Prince Sabahaddin had been

ignored going back to the turn of the century, so now would Turkish army reformers be left in the lurch by the liberal power they most admired. On about 10 July, less than two weeks before Abdul Hamid was forced to accept the constitution, a young CUP officer visited the British Embassy in Constantinople, informing Vice-Consul W. J. Heathcote (perhaps a week or two prematurely) that 'in the course of a day or two a revolutionary movement would break out'. The Young Turk army conspirator then 'asked Mr. Heathcote what the attitude of Great Britain would be towards the movement, and stated that it was the desire of his party to be on friendly terms with that country'. Acting with the utmost diplomatic correctness, Heathcote declined to discuss the matter.³⁶

The Germans too were caught off guard by the events of July. At first the reaction in Berlin was hostile, as the Sultan's humiliation seemed to herald the end for Abdul Hamid, the Kaiser's friend and ally. Of particular concern was the fate of Izzet Pasha, the Sultan's notorious secret police chief, regarded by many in the capital as a German tool. The Young Turks were baying for his head, and he was rumoured (correctly, as it turned out) to be hiding in the German Embassy. As Kiderlen-Wächter complained to Bülow on 27 July 1908, 'there reigns here an unmistakable discord against Germany, partly due to our previous good relations with the sultan and the palace, partly due to the fact that any Turk, who can speak any foreign language at all, understands only French and ... the French papers here [are] doing everything possible to incite [hostility] against us'.³⁷ Luckily for Kiderlen-Wächter, Izzet Pasha skipped town in early August, before the revolutionaries could get their hands on him – escaping on a *British* vessel, which deflected a good deal of political heat away from the German Embassy.³⁸

Still, the German position at the Porte remained fragile. Baron Marschall returned to Constantinople at last in late August, and tried to put a brave face on things. As if to welcome back the discredited Abdul Hamid's closest German confidant, Turkish railway workers launched a general strike on 2 September 1908, which hit the Baghdad line hard. Although the strikers were not necessarily all hostile to Germany, they did make a special demand that German managers try harder to accommodate Muslim sensibilities, particularly related to the payment of *baksheesh* (which Teutonic propriety frowned on). Deutsche Bank was called in to help resolve the dispute.³⁹

Still more damaging to Germany's reputation in Turkey was her Austrian ally's annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina on 6 October 1908. Although Austria-Hungary had been administering the province in practice since 1879, the Berlin settlement of 1878 had put Bosnia under nominal Ottoman suzerainty as a salve to wounded Turkish pride after the war with Russia. Making the Austrian annexation even more ominous, it was announced the day after Bulgaria had formally declared its independence from Constantinople, and just days before Crete announced that it would unify with Greece. In less than a week, the new CUP regime had suffered three grave humiliations, each of them a specific repudiation of the Berlin Treaty, theoretically underwritten by Germany, erstwhile ally of the Sultan: and yet Germany had done nothing to stop them. Already the Young Turks had begun talking about annulling the recent Baghdad railway deal, and giving a new concession to Great Britain. As Karl Helfferich, the new Director of Deutsche Bank, observed in December 1908 about the diplomatic revolution at the Porte, Baron Marschall, long referred to by his fellow diplomats as the 'Giant of the Bosphorus', now had 'no weight to throw onto the scales in Istanbul; he was laid completely flat by his Austrian friendship'.⁴⁰

Despite appearances, not all was lost for Germany. Because the key CUP conspirators of July 1908, officers like Major Ahmed Niyazi and Enver Bey, came from the army, they had an almost instinctual respect for Germany, whose own soldiers had helped train them. The Young Turks even invited old von der Goltz Pasha back for another go as the Turkish military's modernizer-in-chief – although, in a curious nod to the pro-Entente inclinations of many of CUP's civilian politicians, they expressly asked the British to approve the appointment.⁴¹

The Germans were pleasantly surprised to learn that they had admirers even in the new Ottoman parliament. Ahmed Rıza, the longtime leader of the CUP's central committee in Paris, would return from exile in triumph to become Speaker of the Ottoman Chamber elected in early December 1908. On his way back home from France, Rıza petitioned the Kaiser one last time for a meeting: this time, Wilhelm said yes. Despite being rebuffed by and spied on for years by the Germans, Ahmed Rıza was still, improbably, a Germanophile, as the Kaiser, Chancellor Bülow and the Wilhelmstrasse were all astonished to learn.

Evidently it had escaped everyone's attention in Berlin until now that *Rıza's mother was German*.⁴² To adapt Bismarck's famous remark about luck in diplomacy, we might say that God reserved a special providence for drunks, fools and the Germans in Turkey.

Ahmed Rıza is an intriguing figure, whose rapid rise and fall in the Young Turk revolution has much to tell us about Turkish Muslims and their conflicted attitudes towards the Christian West. Rıza's father, who had befriended visiting British officers during the Crimean War, was known as 'English Ali', owing to his proficiency in that language, particularly rare in that era. A liberal admirer of Great Britain, Ali had served in the first Ottoman parliament – the one dissolved by Abdul Hamid in 1878. 'English Ali' had fathered Ahmed Rıza in wedlock with a converted Muslim from Munich (she seems to have met 'English Ali' while he was posted to the Turkish Consulate in Prussian Berlin in the late 1850s). It is easy to see where Rıza's cosmopolitan ease with languages came from: born, in 1859, of a famously English-speaking father and a German-speaking mother, he was schooled in French, at the renowned lycée at Galatasaray.⁴³

Like most CUP leaders, Ahmed Rıza had oscillated between a genuine admiration for European culture and a resentment at Islamic inferiority vis-à-vis the West. His intellectual development was typical of Young Turk exiles: fluency in French led to a flirtation with fashionable positivism, which produced a kind of political liberalism tinged with a prickly defensiveness about Islam and European designs on Ottoman territory. Rıza became more reactionary after the turn of the century, embracing a kind of aggressive Ottoman nationalism (the 'unionist' position) to counter the open anti-Hamidian treachery of his rival Prince Sabahaddin, who remained the patron saint of Ottoman liberals. In this, too, Rıza was typical of the CUP movement.⁴⁴ No matter how hard Young Turks like Ahmed Rıza tried publicly to deny their hostility to Islamic traditions, however, the habits of mind inculcated in them by long residence in Christian Europe could not be hidden for ever. Western attitudes towards women were particularly hard to shed once CUP activists had adopted them, sometimes without even realizing it – and these attitudes were not easily reconciled with the Islamic faith. As a younger Ahmed Rıza had once written to his sister from Paris:

Were I a woman, I would embrace atheism and never become a Muslim. Imagine a religion that imposes laws always beneficial to men but hazardous to women such as permitting my husband to have three additional wives and as many concubines as he wishes, houris awaiting him in heaven, while I cover my head and face as a miller's horse. Beside these I would not be allowed to divorce a husband who prevented me from having any kind of fun, but would be required to submit to his beatings. Keep this religion far away from me.⁴⁵

Staunch secularist, borderline atheist and closet feminist, Ahmed Rıza was not likely to become popular among the Islamic *umma* of Constantinople in his long-delayed return from European exile.

With almost painful inevitability, Ahmed Rıza emerged in the winter of 1908–9 as a potent symbol of everything ordinary Muslims detested about the new CUP government. Contrary to the general impression abroad, the Young Turk revolution had not really ushered in an era of secularism, despite the clear endorsement in the CUP programme of equal rights for religious minorities, which had ostensibly ended the inferior civil status for Christian and Jewish *dhimmis* under Sharia law.* Western press reports about the joyous, multi-ethnic, multi-faith crowds celebrating the supposed downfall of Abdul Hamid in July 1908 had generally failed to note that many of the demonstrators outside Yıldız Palace had actually been cheering him. Even as mutinous army officers promised to bring an end to Hamidian tyranny, the most popular slogan on the streets had been 'Long Live the Sultan!' (*Padişahım çok yaşa!*). Abdul Hamid had not been deposed, after all: after placing his hand on the Koran and swearing an oath to the 1876 Constitution (an oath registered by the *Şeykh-ul-Islam*), the Sultan-Caliph was, to all appearances, more popular now than ever before.

The position of CUP secularists was hardly strengthened by the loss of Ottoman Bosnia and Bulgaria in October 1908, humiliations which

* *Dhimmi*, from the Arabic word for 'protected', denotes the inferior status of religious minorities under Sharia law – relating to everything from the payment of special taxes to the exemption from military service. Although legally inferior to Muslims, *dhimmis* still received official 'protection' as fellow monotheists, and the freedom to practise their religion: animists, Zoroastrians and pagan polytheists, by contrast, were inferior even to *dhimmis*, denied the right to freedom of worship under Sharia.

were compounded by the fact that they took place during the holy month of Ramadan. Resentful, revanchist, reactionary, pro-Hamidian Islam made a rapid comeback after its (apparent) eclipse in July: street demonstrations were now directed openly against the CUP, and were 'spearheaded by religious figures – *muezzins*, *imams* and *hocas*'. After a winter lull, the protest movement gathered momentum in spring, with many parliamentary liberals joining with the Hamidian reactionaries in opposing the 'unionist' CUP government. Sparked by the dramatic murder of liberal newspaper editor Hasan Fehmi on the Galata bridge, the riots built up to a crescendo on the night of 12/13 April 1909, when an angry horde of Islamic theological students (*softas*), accompanied by 3,000 mutinous soldiers, many from the Imperial Guard, stormed the parliament in Sultanahmet. Their demands were three: a return to the 'sharia law of the illustrious Mohammed', the restoration of Abdul Hamid's full imperial powers, and the handing over of Ahmed Rıza – so he could be hanged.⁴⁶ Just as Abdul Hamid's hated spy chief had been bundled out of town during the July revolution to escape mob justice, so now, in the April counter-revolution, the Speaker of the CUP-dominated parliament was threatened with lynching. In ironic testimony to the enduring strength of Berlin's position at the Porte, Ahmed Rıza, like Izzet Pasha before him, sought Germany's protection – in Rıza's case, not in the Embassy but in a Baghdad Railway Company building.⁴⁷ It was enough to produce whiplash: from Hamidian despotism to CUP constitutionalism and back again in only nine months.

The events of April 1909 were not auspicious for Turkish secularists. Although many liberals had supported the opposition movement, it rapidly became clear that reactionary Islam, not liberalism, was the flavour of the hour. Many hard-won gains of the revolution, like civil equality for Christians and Jews, were now summarily swept aside.* On 15 April, the Ottoman constitution was formally suspended and replaced by Sharia law, as wired to every regional governor. As if to

* There is a great deal of confusion about when, exactly, religious equality came to the Ottoman Empire, if it ever did. In the sense of freedom of worship, the three monotheistic faiths were always equal. With regard to civil status and tax obligations, talk of civil equality had begun with the Tanzimat. The 'infidel' poll tax (*jizya*) endured, but was transformed, in 1856, into a kind of compulsory duty exempting non-Muslims from military service, which exemption was enforced until 1909. Contrary to the usual

remind non-Muslims of their inferior status as *dhimmis* (Christians in Cilicia, Edwin Pears was told by locals, ‘had asserted their liberty and equality with Moslems in terms which were unnecessarily offensive’), reactionary mobs wandered through Anatolian towns, looking for infidels to attack. Twenty thousand Armenians were reportedly killed in Adana alone.⁴⁸ An atmosphere of terror prevailed in Constantinople, where ‘educated CUP ministers were assassinated, their offices ransacked, and their newspaper presses destroyed’.⁴⁹

It was a moment of truth for the Young Turk movement. Even though the CUP had won the parliamentary elections of 1908, the counter-revolution of April 1909 seemed to reflect genuine public opinion. Mob rule it may have been, but there was no doubt whose side the crowds were on: they wanted the Sultan and Sharia, not European-style ‘Union and Progress’. In a sense the events of July 1908 had not changed anything at all. The Sultan’s surrender had created the illusion of consensus, in which all factions could see what they wanted in the restoration of the constitution: liberal parliamentary rule and minority rights, a CUP coup, restoration of Sharia law. Abdul Hamid, meanwhile, had remained in place, a symbol of the old ways for those who had never warmed to the new regime. If the revolution were to be completed, perhaps Abdul Hamid would have to be overthrown by the army after all.

This time, there would be no illusion of a popular mandate for the revolution. To regain power, the Young Turks would have to take the capital by force. Regrouping in Salonica, leading CUP officers, including the German-trained Enver and Niyazi Bey, under the command of General Mahmud Şevket Pasha, formed the ominously titled ‘Army of Deliverance’ (*Hareket ordusu*) to march on Constantinople.⁵⁰ Constitutionally speaking, there was good cause: the mutineers of 12–13 April had indeed

understanding that the constitution suspended by Abdul Hamid had been ‘liberal’, however, the 1876 constitution explicitly restored the Holy Law. In this sense the restoration of the constitution in July 1908 was easily interpreted – and *was* interpreted by many imams – as a return to Sharia. Of course, this is not what the Young Turks understood by the restoration of constitutional liberties in the July revolution; but it is easy to see why others did see it this way. For Ottoman Muslims, the idea of the ‘Holy Law’ was no less sacred than, say, the 1787 constitution is for modern Americans. Politicians, as the Young Turks discovered in 1909, openly traduced it at their peril.

overthrown a legally elected parliament by armed insurrection. On 24 April 1909, the counter-counter revolution commenced, as the Army of Deliverance crashed into Constantinople, taking the city 'after five hours of bloody street fighting', followed by dramatic public executions of mutinous soldiers and Hamidian Islamists. Abdul Hamid was deposed on 27 April and replaced by Mehmed Reshad V, clearly meant to be a figurehead. As if to rub salt in the wounds of the 'Bloody Sultan', Abdul Hamid was exiled to Salonica, where the army mutiny against him had begun. The CUP was in charge.⁵¹

To what end? Martial law was hardly an inspiring slogan for the new CUP era. To help heal the gaping political breach, Enver Bey organized a public memorial service for fifty unidentified men killed in the battle for the capital, burying them in a common grave. As if seeking to reclaim the moral high ground, Enver alluded – indirectly – to the recent sectarian violence which had followed the Hamidian counter-revolution, proclaiming that here, by contrast, 'Moslems and Christians were lying side by side'. From now on, Enver vowed, Ottoman citizens were all 'fellow-patriots who know no distinction of race or creed'.⁵²

It was fine talk. But Enver knew that across-the-board religious equality was anathema to strict Muslims – it was contrary to the Sharia (although not all Muslims minded the lifting of the Christian exemption from military service in 1909). So, too, was the promotion of women's rights, another Young Turk ideal, unacceptable to the *ulema*. Worst of all, the violation of the Sultan-Caliph by Enver's conquering army could easily appear as sacrilege to pious Muslims, some of whom were beginning to suspect that the Young Turk conspirators were not Muslims at all, but likely *Dönme*, or crypto-Jews.* As Baron Marschall noted in an

* The *Dönme* were followers of the seventeenth-century Ottoman Jewish Messiah Sabbatai Zevi. To escape the inferior condition of *dhimmis*, they converted, publicly, to Islam, but are said to have retained their beliefs. Because the movement was historically centred in Salonica, it was natural for CUP critics to conflate Young Turks with *Dönme*, the idea being that both groups were secret societies. To this day, the notion persists widely that Djavid Bey, the future Finance Minister, was Jewish, but no one has unearthed any evidence this was true. The claim that the Young Turks were 'crypto-Jews' (or Freemasons) is often tinged with a dose of anti-Semitism. Famously, the British Foreign Office adopted this view of the CUP, which seeped into John Buchan's bestselling novel *Greenmantle*, where 'Enver and his precious committee' are belittled as 'a collection of Jews and gypsies.'

authoritative sixteen-page dispatch from Constantinople in autumn 1909 (forwarded on to every German Consul in Europe), the CUP was treading on thin ice after forcibly deposing a Sultan still popular among the *umma*. 'When Muslims learn,' Marschall wrote with a sense of foreboding, 'that the [newly installed] Caliph is powerless, and is only the puppet of people who are more or less estranged from Islam', then a 'major crisis will be unavoidable.' It was in order to forestall another popular Islamic uprising that, Marschall explained, 'since the catastrophe of 13 April the [Young Turks] have become more careful. Women's emancipation is being put to the side, and once again Sharia law is spoken of. Nevertheless strict Muslims regard the whole [CUP] regime with deep mistrust, if not with outright hostility.'⁵³

In order to stay in power, that is, the Young Turks were willing to forgo most of the principles which had inspired them to go into politics in the first place. It was an old, old story, the corruption of power, but in the events of 1909 there was an element of the tragic. For all their faults, most CUP leaders had genuinely wanted to liberalize Ottoman society, by ending Sharia law and bringing civil equality to women and ethnic and religious minorities. True, their motives may have had less to do with altruism than with the desire to modernize the empire so that it could resist European encroachment. But in their willingness (at least before 1909) to work with controversial Armenian organizations like the Dashnaks, and to bring Christians, Jews and ethnic minorities into parliament, the Young Turks had shown real sensitivity to the plight of Ottoman *dhimmis*, and this was truly a revolutionary development in the Islamic world. That they failed to overturn the centuries-old legacy of Sharia law was not surprising – especially considering how little encouragement they received in their efforts to do so from abroad.

It must have been particularly disappointing for the Young Turks that Great Britain, which most of them admired as the world's leading liberal power, so manifestly failed to rise to the occasion. It was one thing to fail to anticipate the Young Turk revolution. It was quite another to misread it after it had occurred. And yet the British Embassy in Pera seemed almost wilfully determined to misunderstand what had happened in July 1908, and even more so the implications of the counter-counter revolution of April 1909. The British Ambassador to the Porte, Sir Gerard Lowther (who, like Marschall, had been absent

from the scene in July 1908), fell under the spell of his First Dragoman Gerald Fitzmaurice, a true blue anti-Semite who 'detested the C.U.P. almost from the very outset'. Endorsing every single crackpot popular rumour about the CUP's origins in crypto-Jewish Freemasonry, Fitzmaurice prepared a thorough report for Lowther in May 1910, which was soon adopted as gospel in the British Foreign Office. 'The Oriental Jew,' according to Fitzmaurice and Lowther, 'is an adept at manipulating occult forces', and had thus manufactured the CUP conspiracy in order to seize control of the Ottoman Empire. By 'imitating the French Revolution and its godless and levelling methods', Young Turk internationalists were proving themselves to be enemies of England and all it stood for.⁵⁴

This misreading of the Young Turks was the opposite of the truth. As we have seen, many of the CUP officers who led the original revolution of July 1908 were great admirers of England. Even Enver Bey, who would later become notorious as Germany's man, was still marked by Anglophilia at the time (his formative posting as military attaché in Berlin occurred only after the April 1909 events). After Enver heard in early August 1908 that the Sultan's spymaster, Izzet Pasha, had escaped on a British vessel, he personally sought out the British Consul in Salonica, Harry Lamb, to warn that aiding and abetting this fugitive would 'alienate the natural sympathy for England now entertained by the Ottoman nation'.⁵⁵ The political wing of the movement was even more pro-British, to the extent of wanting to annul the German Baghdad railway concession and give it to English firms instead.⁵⁶ The biggest Anglophile of all, meanwhile, was Djavid Bey, the Minister of Finance, who went so far as to propose a 'permanent alliance with Britain' in 1911. According to Fitzmaurice and Lowther, however, Djavid was a 'Crypto-Jew' who stood at 'the apex of Freemasonry in Turkey'. Although Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, was willing to entertain the alliance idea, the Foreign Office, influenced by Fitzmaurice, said no.⁵⁷

If the British misreading of the Young Turks as 'crypto-Jew' internationalists during the period of liberal constitutional euphoria was at least vaguely plausible, the failure to read the political shift after April 1909 was simply baffling. True, there were widespread rumours about the CUP's '*Dönme*' connections following the overthrow of

the Sultan-Caliph, which the German Embassy picked up too. But Marschall's interpretation was almost the polar opposite of Fitzmaurice's. The very fact that the CUP was suspected by ordinary Muslims of fronting for Jewish or foreign interests meant, in Marschall's view, that the Young Turks would have to move sharply to the 'right', that is, towards Ottoman-Muslim nationalism. As Marschall wrote to Berlin in April 1911, 'Islamic reactionaries' had 'come to the fore' in the movement. Fitzmaurice's crypto-Jewish bogeyman, Djavid Bey, was even ritually denounced at the CUP congress that month because he *was* suspected of 'fronting for Zionist interests', supporting the 'privileged positions of Jews' in the Ottoman Empire and, not least, of Freemasonry.* All in all, the CUP platform, approved by 180 delegates on 22 April 1911, was, Marschall wrote, 'of a strong Islamic-reactionary character'. As if turning their backs entirely on their origins, the Young Turk committee in the capital even vowed to crack down on 'Judaic-Freemason elements' prevailing in the CUP local in Salonica.⁵⁸

Whether the Young Turks' reactionary turn was just for show or not, it was encouraging for Berlin. Baron Marschall could barely contain his glee in reporting on the April 1911 CUP congress, which seemed to suggest that pan-Islam was back in force, after its temporary eclipse in 1908–9. Abdul Hamid's dramatic fall had turned him into an international martyr of Islam, and an albatross around the neck of the Young Turks who had exiled him. 'Just as the mutineers screamed for Sharia on 13 April,' Marschall wrote, 'so has the parliamentary majority now taken on this slogan as its own.'⁵⁹ The German gamble on the 'Bloody Sultan' had not been in vain after all.

* Bizarrely, the passionate Anglophile Djavid may have been receiving this anti-Semitic abuse precisely because *The Times* correspondent in Constantinople, reportedly on orders from Fitzmaurice, had told CUP parliamentary deputies that 'serious English capital would only flow into the Ottoman Empire once Djavid Bey was sacked from his position [in the Finance Ministry]'.

In the event, Djavid Bey did not lose his job. One suspects the denunciations at the April 1911 congress were simply for public consumption, particularly for the British Embassy – about whose views the Young Turks seem to have been much better informed than vice versa. Djavid Bey, for his part, agreed to step down so as not to become a focal point for 'anti-Semitic rumours', but the CUP quietly turned down his resignation.

The Germans, we might say, had supported Abdul Hamid for the wrong reasons – and they would now support the Young Turks for the wrong reasons too. It is curious to reflect that the brief period of constitutional rule and religious toleration after the July 1908 events coincided with the eclipse of German power at the Porte. The return to chauvinistic, nationalistic Islamic reaction after the April counter-counter revolution put the Germans right back in the saddle. After a long pause during the political crisis of 1908–9, construction on the Baghdad railway resumed in March 1910. To promote the Baghdad railway, Turcophile journalist Ernst Jäckh then organized a VIP tour of Germany for CUP leaders, and penned a classic primer promoting Turkey to German investors and railway workers, *The Rising Crescent*.⁶⁰

Just as the Germans had come around to support them only after they had jettisoned their ideals, so the Young Turks accepted this aid mostly for pragmatic reasons. Like all successful revolutionary movements, the CUP inherited the same problems which had faced the old regime, and with even less political legitimacy to tackle them. The finances were in even worse shape now than under Abdul Hamid. Where the Sultan had raised import duties from 8 to 11 per cent before the July revolution, the Young Turks would hike them still further in September 1909, to 15 per cent. Even so the pinch remained acute, with revenue so tight that the Young Turks were forced to abrogate all kilometric guarantees in the new Baghdad railway deal, negotiated in 1910. Remarkably, the Germans still took on the concession (through a Swiss front company), despite mounting evidence the Ottoman Empire was effectively bankrupt. Deutsche Bank even fronted a major new loan of 160 million francs to Turkey in December 1910 – after both Britain and France had baulked.⁶¹ German armament firms, including Krupp, also signed huge new contracts with the Porte, worth hundreds of millions of Marks, on which payment was to be laggard.⁶²

The difficulties faced by the Ottomans and Germans can be summed up in the ambitious overhaul of the military base at Üsküp (now the Macedonian capital of Skopje). Beginning in June 1912, the German firm of F. H. Schmidt began work on upgrading what was intended as the linchpin of Ottoman Europe. By the end of the year the Porte had ceased payments to F. H. Schmidt as Serbian troops had overrun

Üsküp and Ottoman Europe had substantially ceased to exist. At many different levels, this sort of experience made the Ottoman-German relationship hard to manage.⁶³ For better and for worse the Germans were in Turkey for good now, and not, evidently, for profit.

Jäckh's *Rising Crescent* was nonsense: in fact the Sick Man of Europe was falling to pieces. Like vultures descending on a rotting corpse, predatory neighbours began lopping off territory left and right from the dying empire. The Italian invasion of Libya in September 1911 inaugurated a decade of nearly continuous warfare, in which the Ottoman Empire fought for its very existence. Although the Turks held out bravely in Libya (where both Enver Bey and Mustafa Kemal saw action), the invasion of the remainder of Ottoman Europe by the Balkan League (Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Montenegro) in October 1912 forced the Porte to sue for peace with Italy. By January, with nearly all of Ottoman Albania, Macedonia and Thrace (including the expensively renovated Turkish army base in now-Slavic Skopje) occupied by Balkan Christian armies, rumours swirled around that the Ottoman Cabinet was preparing to surrender even Adrianople (today's Edirne), then holding out under siege. As if to cheat imperial death, CUP conspirators staged yet another palace coup on 23 January 1913, storming the Porte and murdering the War Minister, Nazım Pasha.

The new government, with Mahmud Şevket Pasha installed as Grand Vizier (until he, too, was assassinated in June), vowed to pursue the Balkan war to the bitter end. But the end was not long in coming. By the terms of the London Agreement of 30 May 1913, Ottoman Europe all but passed into the history books, with the new borders of enlarged Christian Bulgaria pressing right up against the beleaguered capital. It is true that the Ottoman army, under Enver's direct command, recaptured the historic former Ottoman capital of Adrianople in July, pushing the borders back some 200 kilometres west. But even this partial recovery was mostly due to the falling out of the Balkan jackal states: Bulgaria had attacked Serbia and Greece in the 'Second Balkan War', leaving its new eastern border undefended. Although it was a great boon to Enver's reputation, the reconquest of Adrianople could not hide the fact that the Ottoman Empire had, by August 1913, lost four-fifths of its European territory and two-thirds of its European subjects.

One might expect that the collapse of Ottoman power in Europe would have disappointed the Germans, who had invested so much time and energy in promoting the *Drang nach Osten*. 'Not a pfennig for a weak Turkey,' the pan-Germans had vowed, hoping that the Baghdad railway would breathe life into the Ottoman Sick Man, harnessing the long-dormant might of Islam against Britain. Whether it was shoring up the sovereign power of Sultan Abdul Hamid, or supporting Young Turk modernizers, the idea, all along, had been to defend the Ottoman Empire against the great Christian powers – and now here were tiny Balkan parvenu states destroying it on their own. It was enough to discourage even Baron Oppenheim, who returned to Germany in autumn 1913 to take up permanent residence in Berlin, as if giving up on his beloved Orient.⁶⁴

There was, however, a silver lining for Germany in Turkey's sad plight. Just as the British bullying of Abdul Hamid in the Aqaba crisis of 1906 had stirred up angry Muslims from Egypt to British India, so now did the death agonies of the Ottoman Empire furnish a *cause célèbre* for the global *ulema*. Despite everything the Young Turks had done to weaken the Sultanate, Constantinople was still the seat of the Caliphate, which retained huge symbolic importance in the Islamic world. As German Consul-General Luxburg reported from Calcutta on 16 January 1913, as the Balkan armies were threatening the Ottoman capital, 'a thousand channels flow from here to Constantinople, and if the inheritance of the prophet [i.e. the Caliphate] were in strong hands it could bring forth apparitions, which could seriously shake the equilibrium of this land'.⁶⁵ Muslim *medresses* throughout India were raising money from schoolchildren to save the Ottoman Sultan-Caliph.⁶⁶ The Turkish reconquest of Adrianople in July 1913 was greeted by Indian Muslims as if it was their own deliverance from oppression. That month, reported Luxburg (now escaping the summer heat, like the British Raj, in the Himalayan hill-station of Simla), 'prayers for the success of Islamic arms were given in all the mosques'. In Lahore, there were 'large public demonstrations which were ... very uncomfortable for the English authorities'.⁶⁷ In early August, a mob of angry Muslims in Cawnpore battled British-Indian police, who fired into the crowd, killing eighteen rioters and wounding thirty. There may have been local grievances as well (it was rumoured infidels renovating a mosque had entered its sacred precincts without removing their

shoes), but Luxburg believed the real animating passion of the rioters was 'the threat to the existence of Islam evoked by the plight of the Sultan'. The casualties of Cawnpore were now, like the Ottoman Caliph, being fêted all over Muslim India as martyrs to the faith.⁶⁸

By pumping up the Islamic Caliphate, British and German propaganda had created a monster. It was beginning to seem as if the puppet Sultan of the Young Turk regime was a giant voodoo doll of Islam: prick him (say, by sending an infidel army in his general direction) and Muslims halfway across the world cried out in pain. The British Raj, wrote Luxburg from Simla in August 1913, 'must view with a sense of powerlessness how, during Ramadan, the story of the events in Cawnpore is spreading like fire through the bazaars ... disturbing spirits and joining them together'. The 'Mohammedan', as the British were learning, 'forgets nothing'.⁶⁹ The global wave of Muslim rage in 1913 reached Britain itself, despite London not being in any meaningful sense a belligerent in the Balkan wars which were the ostensible source of Islamic grievance. Reporting on the tempestuous proceedings of an 'All-India Muslim Meeting' held in London that July, Germany's Ambassador Prince Lichnowsky concluded that 'the recent Turkish war has demonstrated the solidarity of the entire Islamic [world]'.⁷⁰

Just as Oppenheim had predicted, a single *cause célèbre* happening anywhere in the Muslim world could now, thanks to the globalized media, 'send waves across the entire world of Islam'. It did not matter if the news from the war front was good or bad, or who was fighting, or where: all publicity was good publicity. If the tens of millions of Muslim subjects in British India could get this aroused by a war between Ottoman Turkey and a few Balkan mini-states, imagine what they could do if the power threatening the Sultan-Caliph were Great Britain itself. If Germany could conjure up such a war, the waves of Muslim rage could bring the British Empire to its knees. After long years in the wilderness, Baron Max von Oppenheim, the prophet of global jihad, would now take centre-stage.