THE GERMAN MOMENT IN 1918

Jennifer L. Jenkins
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

I. Introduction

At the end of the First World War, Germany’s diplomats mobilized plans for creating a vast economic sphere of influence in eastern Europe, the Caucasus and southern Russia. Looking at this “German moment” in 1918, this article addresses the global economic maps generated by the German Foreign Office and raises the question of how these connections played forward into the postwar period. “Germanness” in this context refers to forms of economic thinking, organization and expansion rather than primarily to ideas of culture, language or ethnicity. In its expansive parameters and with its economic emphases, this “German moment” provides a perspective on the end of the war that has been largely forgotten in the field at large. Here 1918 was a beginning rather than an end.

The year 1918 is indelibly marked by Germany’s defeat in the First World War. It is remembered in terms of imperial collapse and revolutionary change, as the autocratic Prusso-German state made way for a democratic, republican successor. Given the magnitude of events on the western front toward the end of the year, it is often forgotten that the first two-thirds of 1918 presented a radically different picture of Germany’s future. The winter and spring of 1918 were characterized by diplomatic activity and dramatic territorial expansion, through which Germany sought to end the war on her own terms. With the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk between the Central Powers and Lenin’s Bolsheviks in March 1918 — and secured via the Supplementary Treaties to Brest signed over the spring and summer — Germany achieved her eastern war aims and ruled over an imperial zone stretching from the Baltic to Persian Armenia and the shores of the Caspian Sea. This state of affairs lasted until the fall. It was Germany’s “moment” in 1918.

How can we now think of the German moment one hundred years later? What can it tell us about German expansionism and empire, power and identity (themes of the German Historical Institute’s “Intersections” project) at the end of the First World War? How did it relate to its better-known Wilsonian counterpart? And why, in
comparison to the former, has it been so thoroughly forgotten? Ger-
many’s defeat in the war is the obvious answer, but it is not the only
one. For clear and plausible reasons our histories of the First World
War are dominated by their attention to military matters, including
the military reordering of German society. The German moment, by
contrast, highlighted three topics that, until recently, were largely
overlooked in histories of the war: the actions of German diplomats,
the power of economic plans and the interaction of non-European
actors with both of the above. In 1918 all three combined in projects
which laid down markers for the future. In 1918 diplomats, together
with planners from the Reich Economic Office, sought to create a
German economic sphere across the territories of the former Russian
Empire. In this attempt they struggled against the Supreme Army
Command (Oberste Heeresleitung, hereafter OHL), specifically with
Generals von Hindenburg and Ludendorff and their opposing concep-
tions of power and security. The Foreign Office was not powerless in
this struggle, as has long been thought. Rather than being steadily
outmaneuvered by the military, they engaged in futuristic thinking,
putting forward a number of out-of-the-box strategies. The ensuing
contest between the Foreign Office and the OHL gave the German
moment some of its most striking characteristics.

The German moment went far beyond Mitteleuropa. Geographi-
cally the diplomats’ plans stretched much further east and south
than often remembered. The economic arrangements at their heart
were to be run through alliances — “partnerships” in the lingo of
the Foreign Office — with local nationalist elites. While this topic
has been researched for the territories of Eastern and Central
Europe — most particularly for Ukraine — it has been kept inside
a broadly European frame. This shields its full scope from view,
the grandiosity of the imperial map that it unfurled. It also masks
the actions and aims of nationalists — Georgians, Persians and
others — and their desires in 1918 to pursue postwar futures under
a German security umbrella.

What follows is an overview of the German moment: its embedding in
the wartime strategies of the Foreign Office, specifically the program
for Aufwiegelung (insurrection); the diplomats’ use in 1918 of a lan-
guage of self-determination, which connected the German moment
to its Wilsonian cousin, and the economic treaties through which
they aimed to control the infrastructure and resources of their new
“client state” partners. Included is an up-close look at two particu-
lar arenas. How the German moment took shape on the ground in

---

3 The latter third of Fritz Fischer’s Griff nach der Weltmacht addressed this issue at length. However, given that the debate on Fischer’s book looked primarily at the war’s origins rather than its end, many of his points were neglected at the time. They will be drawn on in the analysis that follows.

4 Peter Borowsky, Deutsche Ukrainepolitik 1918: unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Wirtschaftsfragen (Lübeck, 1970).
the Caucasus and Iran is a largely unknown story. Its contours, particularly the economic arrangements made with Georgian nationalists, mirrored Germany’s draconian plan for rule in Ukraine. Those for Iran remained more project than reality, given Britain’s rapid advance toward Baku and its assertion of military supremacy across the Middle East. Yet these two examples reveal how in 1918 Germany’s diplomats conceptualized a global east, which they called a “new orient.”

II.

As both vision and plan, the German moment built on the Foreign Office’s wartime programs to instigate popular uprising across the British and Russian empires. Diplomats at all levels were mobilized for this “program for revolution.” This was Fritz Fischer’s name for the strategy. Diplomats called it Aufwiegeln, or insurrection.5 The program was largely run by two people: the consular official Count Max von Oppenheim, who headed the Information Service for the East (Nachrichtenstelle für den Orient), the program’s propaganda arm, and the East Prussian Rudolf Nadolny (Figure 1), a middle-class diplomat from the trade section of the Foreign Office.6 By 1915 Oppenheim had been sent to Istanbul and Nadolny ran operations from Berlin. With his formal title as head of the Political Section of the Reserve General Staff, a liaison office


6 Despite Nadolny’s importance to German foreign policy, including his actions as ambassador to Turkey and the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s, there is to date no comprehensive biography. The fullest treatment is Günter Wollstein, “Rudolf Nadolny: Außenminister ohne Verwendung,” Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte, Sonderdruck Heft 1 (1980): 47-93.
between the Foreign Office and the OHL, Nadolny ran the military intelligence office for covert operations, known as Section IIIb.7

As such he directed the nationalist committees at the center of the revolution program. These were staffed with anti-colonial intellectuals and politicians from across the British, French and Russian Empires. Together with the Indian and Irish committees, founded at the start of the war, Nadolny and his Foreign Office colleagues oversaw Persian (Figure 2), Georgian, Egyptian, Algerian, Tunisian and Tatar committees (and many others besides). Committee members conducted propaganda operations — particularly amongst Muslim prisoners in Germany’s prisoner of war camps — and ran military missions. In the process they assembled global networks of weapons, information and money (the actions of the Indian Independence Committee were particularly striking in this regard).8 As an organizer of the Afghanistan Expedition, itself part of the Aufweigeltung strategy, Nadolny was active across several theatres of war. In 1918 he sat on the negotiating team at Brest-Litovsk with Foreign Secretary Richard von Kühlmann and representatives from the Foreign Office and the military. He was a force in the shaping of the German moment.

The making of a “new Orient” was his specialty. In the spring of 1917 from Kirkuk, where he was stationed with German and Ottoman troops, Nadolny sent Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg a policy assessment. The military situation was weak, he admitted to Bethmann. The second Persian campaign, which he had helped to lead, had failed; the Turkish Sixth Army had been forced to withdraw and British troops, the South Persia Rifles commanded by Percy Sykes, were on the march. Yet all was not lost, Nadolny wrote. Despite the military setback, Germany’s political interests were fully in play. “When we recognize, as we must in these circumstances,” he wrote, “that the military goal of our actions has not yet been realized and cannot be

---


easily realized, we also see . . . that we have . . . achieved certain other results, which could be vital to our overall political security."^9

Nadolny referred to “our future work in Central Asian countries,” pointing to the strategic opportunities provided by Russia’s inner turmoil. With his colleagues in the revolution program, Nadolny saw Russian distress as offering long-term possibilities to Germany’s search for position. The spread of anti-British sentiment across Persia and Central Asia, he claimed, had similar effects. The moment was approaching, Nadolny wrote to Bethmann, to capitalize on these factors and extend Germany’s eastern reach. He outlined aspects of the strategy, the goal of which was the creation of a sphere of influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Following the end of the war Nadolny believed that Persia and Afghanistan could potentially be attached to Germany. “The question of the efficacy of our broader influence on Afghanistan and Persia after the war,” he told Bethmann, “comes to whether it is advisable for us to protect these two states against Russian and English invasion or if we should give them up.”^10 Up to this point Germany had “observed the existing collision of English and Russian interests and decided that it was in our interest to let this collision go forward, to let these natural enemies go at each other.” This had worked in the past; a different strategy was needed now. “The notion that one has to leave Central Asia to Russia and Britain, and to turn these two Central Asia states over to them, is mistaken,” he wrote. “If I may infringe on our general political goals,” he said to Bethmann, “when the Near East is seen as a glacis of our Middle European fortress, the eastern border of this glacis is not to be found on the Persian border but in the Himalayas.”^11 As the most viable weapon for pushing the German glacis into Central Asia, Nadolny chose nationalist mobilization, supported but not dominated by military power. This use of national groups as agents of German expansion was central to the strategies set out by diplomats at the negotiating table at Brest Litovsk, Nadolny chief among them.

There were complicating factors, first and foremost with the Turkish ally. The Young Turks’ war aims clashed with Germany’s, particularly regarding the postwar status of Persia and Afghanistan. Nadolny reminded Bethmann that “up to this point the Turks have regarded our work in Persia and Afghanistan with profound suspicion, mainly due to the fact that we are speaking of Muslim territories in which she herself wishes to win influence via the idea of a pan-Islamic Caliphate.”^12 The Young Turk demand at the 1915 Constantinople Congress “for the recognition of Turkish supremacy over all Islamic

^9 Political Archive of the German Foreign Ministry Berlin (hereafter PAAA), Rudolf Nadolny Papers, Vol. 19, 1510: Nadolny to Bethmann Hollweg, April 14, 1917, Kirkuk.

^10 Ibid.

^11 Ibid.

^12 Ibid.
states” and the demand “to conduct negotiations with such states only through the Turkish government” made for a considerable divide with its German ally. A different strategy was needed, and Nadolny was pragmatic. He believed that pan-Islamic aspirations were malleable and that they mixed with nationalist desires in complicated ways. He knew from working with the Persian committee, and their hostile response to Ottoman pan-Islamism, that national aspirations could be stronger. Moreover, all of these impulses could be turned in pro-German directions. As a goal, he stressed to Bethmann, Germany could create:

a pan-Islamic bloc of states reaching from Constantinople to Kabul, which the British and Russians will discover at war’s end. They will find this most unpleasant. With this strategy the ability of these three states—Turkey, Persia and Afghanistan—to resist Russian and British attacks will be increased, and our position (Glacis) will thereby be reinforced.

The path toward this goal was political, and it lay in the hands of the Foreign Office. It involved continued collaboration with the national committees in the revolution program, namely support for their liberation struggles. It meant calibrating their activities in the service of German war aims. The committees would be the instruments through which German influence would be extended across Central Asia. The program was suited for this task; it had already produced certain facts on the ground. “Our work has created the following situation,” Nadolny wrote:

1. In India the desire for independence, and the idea of tearing loose from England, has grown substantially.
2. Afghanistan … in its quest to rescue its independence from England and Russia … is seeking a connection to us and our allies.
3. In Persia, the idea is now widespread that the last possible moment of rescue from the Russian-English division of the country has arrived, and that this is possible only with the help of Germany and its allies. The country desires from us protection for its independence and offers in return everything that it can possibly give.

Nadolny closed his report by citing Lord Curzon’s Persia and the Persian Question, on “the importance of the Central Asian (mittelasiatischen) countries”: “Turkestan, Afghanistan, Transcaspia, Persia — to many these names breathe only a sense of utter remoteness of a memory of strange vicissitude and or moribund romance. To me, I
confess, they are the pieces on a chessboard upon which is being played out a game for the dominion of the world.” He then followed Curzon’s words with his own recommendation. “Should we sit idly by,” he asked the Chancellor, “until the war ends and one of the two [England or Russia] snatches global dominance for itself? I think that it is our duty to influence this fight, even when only with the smallest resources, for global dominance will then go to neither of them. Or, if it has to fall to someone, why not us?”

Why not us? It was a sharp question.

III.

Leaving Kirkuk in the spring of 1917, Nadolny returned to Berlin and the Foreign Office. The revolution program was in the midst of its most significant achievement: the covert action run by Count Ulrich von Brockdorff-Rantzau, Germany’s envoy in Denmark, to transport Vladimir Lenin from Zurich to St. Petersburg. Undersecretary Zimmermann assigned Nadolny to the Russia file, which secured his influence on the forward development of policy. In addition, he wrote to his attache, he was “overseeing the division that dealt with Persian matters” (Iran belonged to the Russia file). In December 1917 Nadolny traveled with the team to the Russian fortress of Brest-Litowsk to negotiate an armistice with the Bolshevik government. Openings were to be seized in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution, and the Brest negotiations were highly opportunistic. Operating largely behind the scenes, Nadolny was one of the most active members of this group.

Since the beginning of the war Germany’s aims had concentrated on the disintegration of the Russian empire and the transformation of its western territories into a band of buffer states. How this was to be achieved was a matter of contention, but that Germany would extend its sphere of influence deep into Russian territory was not. The Brest team in 1918, however, had to address a particular problem. Gains achieved via annexation were held to be illegitimate. “The Central Powers in general were in a difficult position,” Nadolny wrote. “They had conquered a huge amount of territory and wanted to ... annex it ... however, they had agreed, as a basis of the peace, to refrain from annexation.” Moreover the Russians, Nadolny stated, “continually tried to present the Central Powers as annexationists,” a charge which needed to be defended against. However, simultaneously rejecting the label of annexationist while also desiring the taking and holding of territory — annexation — was, Nadolny wrote, “not easy.”

16 Ibid.
19 As Fischer reminds us, “as early as the second week of the war it had declared the detachment of Ukraine from Russia to be an official object of German policy, and it preserved this long-term aim for the eventuality of a German dictated peace.” Fischer, Germany’s Aims in the First World War (New York, 1967), 133.
relationship to the independence committees informed the negotiating strategy going forward. Annexation was replaced with the more supple concepts of “association” and “agreement” (Vertrag). As in the revolution program, expansion was conceptualized via “partnerships” with national groups. Its economic focus was also vital. While the agreements spoke of political liberation, they did so in the abstract. Practically speaking they highlighted economic arrangements, the turning over of vast amounts of resources and infrastructure to Germany, also considered to be a supple means of expansion. In 1918 Germany sought to secure ports, railroads and supply chains as “war economic necessities.” Karl Helfferich, a leading negotiator in this process, argued that Germany could achieve her economic security goals without engaging in direct annexation (that the latter would be unnecessary). Was there one concept that could square this circle for the negotiating table? The term that worked in this flexible fashion, signifying possibilities both abstract and concrete, was the political word of the year: self-determination.

In a speech to the Reichstag on New Year’s Day 1918, Foreign Secretary Richard von Kühlmann set out the approach to the Brest negotiations. Self-determination, he stated, was the foundation. The language of self-determination claimed to be principled and altruistic. Its use by Germany’s diplomats constituted a sharp strategic move, tailor made to the needs of the moment. “Open annexation appeared to be a road that one could not go down,” wrote Fischer, particularly as the Brest negotiations had to be sold to the parliament and the public. Building on self-determination, Nadolny located a suitable tactical mechanism. Germany would sign agreements with groups that had declared their independence — Finns, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Georgians, perhaps Persians as well. The signed agreements would legitimate Germany’s presence. “A Ukrainian delegation had been announced,” Nadolny wrote, “which had declared its independence from Russia. They negotiated independently, and a peace treaty was signed with this group. In this way I decided to withdraw the ability of the Russians to label us as annexationists and to arrange for the Lithuanians to declare themselves independent.” Receiving approval for this plan from the Foreign Office, Nadolny traveled to Vilnius with General Hoffmann to negotiate with the Lithuanian representatives (Tarbya). Although the German military worked with the Tarbya, Nadolny wrote that his action led to an open conflict with the OHL. “As I returned to Brest,” he wrote, “I found there a complaint about me — eight telegram pages long — that General Ludendorff had given

22 Fritz Fischer, Griff nach der Weltmacht: die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914/18 (Düsseldorf, 1961), 646.
23 Nadolny, Mein Beitrag, 110.
to the Reich Chancellor. He accused me of creating discord between the Reich government and the military command.”

Nadolny refused to stand down, stating that he had received approval through the proper channels. Given that the diplomats were now running with a policy on steroids, Nadolny was not reprimanded. His own demand that Ludendorff apologize to him was, however, not fulfilled.

The strategy moved forward. We should strive, Kühlmann stressed, “to get for ourselves through the right of national self-determination whatever territorial concessions we absolutely needed.”

Yet how the claims to independence made by the nationalist committees would square with German power aspirations was an open question. The decision to focus on economic control, rather than political power or territorial colonization, provided some wiggle room. Starting in 1916, officials in the Foreign Ministry had sketched out their vision of a “new Orient” in which economic issues played a central role.

Their journal of the same name, The New Orient, which had started life as the propaganda organ for Oppenheim’s Information Service for the East, by 1918 published articles from Indian, Azeri, Persian, Tatar, Georgian and Ukrainian nationalists. They detailed projects of economic development in the Caucasus, Ukraine, Georgia and Russian Central Asia, Siberia, Japan and India. Their authors came from North Africa, Egypt, the Punjab, and Iran. They wrote on cotton, oil, wheat and railroads, on industrialization and the attainment of national sovereignty via partnership with Germany. In the aftermath of Brest, The New Orient reflected a world which did not materially exist but which both sides wanted to create. It was aspirational rather than actual, and it laid down markers for the future.

Through the revolution program the Foreign Office had positioned itself as the “protector” of oppressed national groups in the Russian Empire and the Middle East, and the strategy of detaching, and “liberating,” Russia’s many nationalities was popular, as Fischer reminds us. It won supporters from all sides of Germany’s political spectrum, from the Pan Germans to the SPD. Diplomats claimed that they stood on the right side of history as protectors of oppressed oriental nationalities. Nadolny’s attaché Wipert von Blücher, who joined his mentor in the Foreign Office on the Russia desk, was effusive on this point. As he wrote, the situation in Iran revealed Germany’s place in a grand historical drama. It was:

one piece of a great historical process developing across all of Asia and seizing one people after another, whether they be

- 25 Fischer, Germany’s Aims, 479, citing to Kühlmann’s Erinnerungen, 523 ff. As Fischer wrote on this “tactical” language: Germany’s diplomats massaged older claims of “annexation” into “more elastic methods of ‘association’ through which Germany tried to turn the new principle of self-determination into a channel for the indirect exercise of her domination.” Germany’s Aims, 444.
- 26 Fischer, Germany’s Aims, 133-34. Germany’s claim to stand for the national liberation of peoples was a central theme in her wartime propaganda. It was a way to sell the war to the public.
Persians, Afghans, or Indians. And while it is possible that this process might, here and there momentarily be stalled . . . it will also roll forward with the kind of elementary force possessed in nature by an avalanche and in history by the idea of progress. Germany’s place in this process is on the side of the Asian people who seek progress. For even if the present decides against us, we stand in solidarity with the future.27

Following the signing of the Brest Treaty in March 1918, the project expanded further, into the Caucasus and Mittelasien. This was “Germany’s great Eastern Idea,” Fischer wrote, “which went far beyond Brest-Litovsk.”28 Germany’s diplomats trained their sights on the Black and Caspian seas, and the economic planners set to work. Mitteleuropa died and Mittelasien was born.

IV.

The German moment in the Caucasus was notably complex with sharp conflict between all parties: the diplomats and the military, the Germans and the Turks. At Brest the Bolsheviks rescinded Russia’s territorial claims to the area and began removing troops. As the Russian military withdrew, the path was open for a German advance. This was also true for the other powers. Between the winter and fall of 1918, the Caucasus became the object of competing war aims. Its geostrategic position, mineral wealth, ports and railroads made the terrain militarily and commercially valuable; its acquisition belonged to the war’s endgame for Germany, Turkey and Great Britain. Lord Curzon wished to carve out a set of buffer states, starting in Transcaucasia and reaching toward India to give Britain an iron grip on the Persian Gulf and Iranian oil.29 Germany targeted the region’s “war economic necessities” — its high quality iron ores, manganese, oil, wheat and cotton — as well as the strategically vital Baku-Batum railroad and the Black Sea ports of Poti and Batum, the latter the terminus of the Baku oil pipeline. The Caucasus was also a geostrategic bridge: to Baku, Iran and Central Asia, as well as to southern Russia and the industrial areas of the Donetz basin. Germany’s military and commercial penetration of southern Russia and Central Asia would not only assert her dominance over rump Russia but would make her impermeable to a British blockade. As Brockdorff Rantzau wrote, “one has conquered Russia only when one possesses southern Russia.”30

27 Wipert von Blücher, Zeitwende in Iran (Biberach an der Riss, 1949), 112f, cited in Michael Jonas’s biography, which focused primarily on Blücher’s career in the Third Reich, NS-Diplomatie und Bündnispolitik, 1935-1944: Wipert von Blücher, das Dritte Reich und Finnland (Paderborn, 2011), 43

28 Fischer, Germany’s Aims, 510. The “completion of Mitteleuropa,” he wrote, “in the last phase was dropped by Germany in favour of the absolute domination of the Ostraum.” This Ostraum included areas the diplomats called “Mittelasien.”


30 PA AA Brockdorff Rantzau Papers, Az 8, 4/3: Rantzau Stenogram, April 1, 1917.
For all of the parties, local forces now came to the fore. A significant factor in the coming Transcaucasian free-for-all were the positions taken by nationalist groups vis-à-vis the powers. The three most prominent political associations—the Georgian Menscheviks, the Armenian Dashnaks and the Azeri Mussavat—mobilized quickly in the political space opened by the Brest armistice. Initially they banded together into the Transcaucasian Federation, a short-lived entity which sought protection against Turkish expansion. However, as the Federation worked toward signing a peace agreement with the Ottoman Empire in the spring of 1918, the political realities of this end phase of the war tore the fragile entity apart. Each of the powers mobilized their own group, and these same groups—reading the realities of the changing military map—appealed to the powers as “protectors”: the Azeris and Caucasian Muslims with the Turks, the Georgians with the Germans and the Armenians with the British, and later with the Americans. The cynical mobilization of local nationalists as proxy fighters for the powers contributed in no small part to the region’s violence.

The Foreign Office claimed to support the Federation in toto, but in reality had eyes only for the Georgians. They were the leaders of the Federation’s parliament (Sejm) and Germany’s chosen collaborators for their client state. A Georgian legion and nationalist committee had been founded early in the war; they were directed by the German Consul in Tiflis, Graf von der Schulenburg, Nadolny’s close collaborator. Diplomats, including Undersecretary von der Bussche, asserted that controlling Georgia was imperative to securing Germany’s future position. As Bussche wrote in an April 1918 memo to the Kaiser: “From the beginning of the war . . . and using all resources Germany has striven to establish a state that will be oriented toward Germany, [will be] located between Russia, Turkey and Persia and will provide access to Central Asia.” That state was Georgia. Bussche


33 Fischer, Griff, 737. Fischer claimed that with this note, Bussche “ordnete . . . die Kauka- suspolitik in die Letzlinien der deutschen Politik ein, die wieder einmal die ganze Kontinuität der deutschen Kriegszielpoli- litik seit 1914 unterst- reichen.” (Griff, 737).
Helfferich envisioned securing the new Georgian state via a two-pronged strategy of diplomatic influence and economic control, which had consequences for policies toward Iran.  

Yet the question of how to navigate Turkey’s claims on the Caucasus deepened the ongoing conflict in Berlin between the military, the diplomats and the economic planners. The possible emergence of a Turkish sphere of interest in the Caucasus was anathema to the Foreign Office, and they vehemently guarded against it. They stated repeatedly the imperative “not to allow access to Central Asia and Persia to lie exclusively in Turkish hands.” The Brest Treaty stipulated a Turkish advance to the 1878 line but not higher. Turkey could claim Kars and Ardahan — lost to Russia in the 1877 Russo-Turkish War — as well as the southern part of Batum, which had a majority Muslim population. Through such provisions the Foreign Office attempted to respond to the Young Turks’ demands while also containing them. Batum’s all-important harbor, for example, was not included. This did not satisfy the Young Turk leadership, despite their signature on the Brest Treaty. Declaring an intent to protect fellow Muslims from possible massacre, the Turkish military advanced into Transcaucasia. Arrangements reaching beyond the parameters of Brest now dominated discussion.

Three days following the fall of Batum on April 15, Helfferich requested clarity on the situation from Kühlmann. He wanted a “definitive statement of Germany’s attitude in the Caucasus.” He took issue with the military strategists, “sharply criticizing the desire of the OHL to join forces with the Turks.” Helfferich made the economic points forcefully. He “drew attention,” as Fischer put it:

to Germany’s great interests in the manganese deposits of Chiaturi and to the possibility of further finds of copper and oil, and polemicized on strategic grounds against the policy of the OHL and its representative on the Turkish General Staff, [Hans von] Seeckt, of leaving Caucasia to Turkey. This policy, he said, would deprive Germany of any possibility of influencing the economic development of Caucasia. The possession of the Batum-Baku line, which Seeckt seemed prepared to cede to the Turks, was decisive for the fate of Transcaucasia. Its ores, oil, cotton, wool — all raw materials needed by German factories, would simply fall into Turkey’s lap.
The military saw the matter differently. In Fischer’s words — and his work is an excellent, albeit largely forgotten, guide to these events — “the OHL supported Turkey’s ambitions with the intention of building up a front in Persia, while the Foreign Ministry was strongly opposed to any Turkish expansion, both on account of the complications with Russia and in view of Germany’s interest in the Caucasus.”41 In the Caucasus Germany’s two central institutions — Foreign Office and OHL — were fighting different endgames for different futures. Yet, for the moment the alliances held: between the military and the diplomats and between the Turks and the Germans. Germany sent a high-level delegation to a new conference in Batum, which was to negotiate a peace between the Transcaucasian Federation and the Young Turks. The delegation’s head was Otto von Lossow, military plenipotentiary at Istanbul, who was “empowered to conclude the preliminaries of a peace between the German Reich and the government of Transcaucasia.”42 He was joined by two of Nadolny’s associates, Schulenburg and the diplomat Otto von Wesendonk, an expert on Russia and Persia.43 Lossow was instructed to hold the Turks to the ground of the Brest treaty in order to “protect Germany’s economic interests in the Caucasus.”44 But relations between the two alliance partners were sharp and bitter. According to one diplomat, Turkish anger at “German meddling” in Batum was expressed by jamming the telegraph communications.45

The Batum conference was not a success. It was hard to see how it could have been. The Transcaucasian Federation splintered under the pressure of the Turkish military advance. Yet, instead of a joyous birth of new national states — as many later histories declared the moment to be — the breaking up of the Federation “forced” its constituent parts to declare independence at the end of May.46 Each now had to go it alone. The Republic of Georgia gravitated immediately toward its German protector, and Lossow signed the Treaty of Poti on May 28, 1918 with representatives of the new state. This treaty conceded Georgia’s considerable mineral wealth, control of her ports and railroads and the lion’s share of her economic resources to Germany. In return Georgia would receive military support and protection.47 The German military immediately seized Georgia’s ports and railroads, and the economic planners swung into action. The deal, however, did not come cheap. As diplomats noted, “we went to great pains to clear ourselves a path to Persia across Transcaucasia” and have “spent millions on creating a pro-German Caucasian state to give us a bridge to Central Asia.”48

---

41 Fischer, Germany’s Aims, 551. On why the last two-thirds of Germany’s Aims have been forgotten, see Jenkins, “Fritz Fischer’s Programme for Revolution.”
42 Fischer, Germany’s Aims, 555.
43 Sommer, Botschafter Graf Schulenburg, 34.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Reynolds, Shattering Empires, emphasizes the gravity of this process and that the declarations of national independence were not a matter for celebration.
47 Kazemzadeh, Struggle for Transcaucasia.
48 Fischer, Germany’s Aims, 551-552.
The way seemed open toward Iran. The political situation looked favorable. Nadolny had stressed to Bethmann the importance of continuing support for the Persian nationalists in their struggle with Britain and Russia. Recent elections to Iran’s parliament in the fall of 1917 had returned German-friendly politicians. Political opinion runs toward the “the central Powers, which view this independence positively,” wrote Mohammad Jamalzadeh, a member of Berlin’s Persian Committee. News from the Brest negotiations strengthened local optimism that Persian sovereignty would be internationally recognized at the meeting and the country offered relief and support. Nadolny’s role at Brest in crafting its Persia-specific articles was known and appreciated. Article 10 of the armistice, and Article 7 of the Treaty were seen as a German promise for the renewal of Iranian sovereignty. Article 10 stipulated, as committee member Wahid al Mulk wrote in The New Orient, that Iran could “once again place itself in possession of its full sovereign rights.” An article in Kaveh (see Figure 3) in February extended the argument. “Kühlmann assured the Persian Committee that the Central Powers will protect Persian independence,” it stated, “this is in contrast to the British, who continue to injure national sovereignty through military actions in the south.” Committee member Hussein Quli Khan spoke with the BZ am Mittag on the “world historical possibilities” of the Brest armistice. “Persia is a small nation,” he told the newspaper. “It fights for its freedom and desires nothing other than justice.” Iranians, he said, “will be filled with a passionate gratitude toward the powerful German Reich, which at this fateful time has brought the fulfillment of Persian hopes and yearnings a step closer.”

Blücher recommended immediate action. “At this moment we cannot allow the Persian question to be carelessly neglected,” he wrote. A British advance must be guarded against. “A legation must immediately be sent to Tehran under military escort,” he recommended. It
should be outfitted with a military attaché, a doctor, radio equipment and “experts on economic — specifically financial — matters.” Consuls and/or consular agents should be placed “in the most important Persian cities not occupied by the British. A legation for Afghanistan should be organized.” Undersecretary Bussche concurred. “In this situation we must be vigilant,” he wrote, “to immediately safeguard our interests in Tehran, which now are threatened only by the British.”

But it wasn’t just the British. It was also the Turks. Here the Foreign Office received a hard reminder of the greater power of the military in wartime strategy. As Lossow and the leader of the Georgian nationalists, Tschenkeli, signed the Poti treaty in Batum, the military situation further east had intensified. In the spring of 1918 Enver put his brother in law, Nuri Pascha, in charge of raising a new “Army of Islam” with the goal of taking Baku from the Bolsheviks. During the month of May the Turks were driving toward Baku. The advance encompassed Iran: namely the western province of Persian Azerbeijan and the northern provinces. It enacted what the German chargé d’affaires in Tehran, Rudolf Sommer, called “the old plan, to tear the province of Azerbeijan away from Persia.” As Georgia went to Germany and the Turks were given a free hand in the eastern Caucasus and northern Iran, the murky outlines of separate German and Turkish spheres of interest in the Caucasus began to emerge.

As a signatory to Brest, Turkey had pledged not to build a sphere of interest in Persia. She was bound by treaty not to infringe on Persian territory, but the recent nature of this promise, or the heat of the fighting, robbed it of its weight. A Turkish force took Tabriz on May 6th and advanced toward Baku. Nadolny’s political strategy for Persia was thus ground between the wheels of Turkish and British military power. Iranian historians concur that German’s actions became utterly subsumed in those of its alliance partner, so “intermingled that it would be impossible to distinguish them from one another.” Blücher wrote despairingly on the decision to give the OHL the upper hand. “The results of the Spa discussions,” he wrote to his former mentor:

mean the wholesale abandonment of Persia. The Persian-friendly policy that we could have pursued in Berlin has been sharply rejected by the military and the diplomats have not opposed them. Persia is to once again become a

54 PA A, Rudolf und Änny Nadolny Papers, Bd. 100: Blücher to Nadolny, January 19, 1918.
theater of war ... one has given the Turks a politically free hand. I don’t believe that this decision can be changed.59

As Blücher feared, Ottoman troops and agents moved into the country. Yusuf Zia, a member of the Teşkilat-ı Mahsus (Enver Pasha’s “Special Organization”), was named “political adviser to the Ottoman contingent in Iran” in April and a pan-Turk party set up shop in Tabriz. The Ottoman paper Azarbayjan propagated Young Turk views throughout northern Iran.60 The call to support Turkish military action was a hard pill for the Foreign Office’s Persian Committee to swallow. Discussions of a “Turkish Persia” were anathema to committee members.61 The Germans had been the safer partner. As the historian Pezhmann Dailami wrote, “some Iranians preferred relations with the Germans rather than the Turks, as they believed that in this way Iranian sovereignty would be less threatened.”62 It was not to be.

V.

The German moment in 1918 was a complicated mixture of economic, political and military plans. Across Mittelasien, which after the Brest treaty replaced Mitteleuropa as a goal of the war, the Foreign Office put its strategy of partnering with nationalist groups — from the Ukrainians to the Georgians and the Persians — into action. Looking at the reach of these plans in the spring and summer of 1918, one sees that the Wilsonian moment was preceded and challenged by a German imperial moment. Although short-lived, it set down markers — and created connections — for the future. While its arrangements were overshadowed by the defeat in 1918, and nullified by the Versailles Treaty in 1919, the economic connections forged between the Foreign Office and the area’s nationalist elites were revitalized in the 1920s and 1930s. Stephen Gross’s excellent monograph Export Empire gives an in-depth look at this process for the Balkans.63 It also stretched further. As ambassador to Ankara after 1924, Nadolny was instrumental in bringing German industry and business into Atatürk’s Turkey. Stationed in Tehran in 1923, Schulenburg did the same for Reza Shah’s Iran. Germany’s support for Iran’s nationalists in 1918 was remembered. It smoothed the making of economic agreements between the two countries, and starting in 1928 Germany became a significant partner in Iran’s industrialization. The memory of these connections still resonates in Persian culture. In this sense the year 1918 reveals a very different set of meanings, highlighting economic beginnings rather than military endings.

59 PA AA Rudolf and Änny Nadolny Papers, Bd. 100: Blücher to Nadolny, May 23, 1918, Berlin.
60 Both examples are from Touraj Atabaki, “Pan-Turkism ad Iranian Nationalism,” in Atabaki, ed., Iran and the First World War, 131.
61 Epkenhans, Iranische Moderne im Exil, 81-86.
Jennifer L. Jenkins is Associate Professor of German and European History at the University of Toronto, where she held a Canada Research Chair in Modern German History from 2004 to 2014. She is currently finishing a book on Germany and Iran in the international system entitled Germany’s Great Game: The Reich and Iran in the Age of Empire, to appear in 2019.