

FACES AND METAMORPHOSES OF RUSSIAN EMPIRES (333 YEARS: 1689–2022)

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From the History of Russian Expansion in the Black Sea Area: The British Position towards the Russo-Turkish Dispute over the Construction of the Fortress of St Elisabeth (1754–1756)*

Zarys treści: W 1751 r. Rosja rozpoczęła organizację kolonii Nowa Serbia na Zaporozżu, co wywołało napięcia z Austrią, gdyż osadnicy pochodzili z jej terytoriów. Z kolei budowa w 1754 r. twierdzy Świętej Elżbiety nad Ingulem spowodowała protest Turcji, która uznała to za złamanie traktatu belgradzkiego (1739). Konflikt groził wybuchem wojny, dlatego dyplomaci brytyjscy i austriaccy starali się uspokoić sytuację i powstrzymać Francję przed wykorzystaniem sporu. Londyn obawiał się, że wojna rosyjsko-turecka osłabi Rosję jako sojusznika w obronie Hanoweru. Rosja w końcu 1754 r. taktycznie zrezygnowała z budowy twierdzy, co Brytyjczycy uznali za swój sukces dyplomatyczny. Po zawarciu w 1755 r. konwencji subsydialnej z Londynem Rosjanie planowali powrócić do sprawy, lecz w 1756 r., w obliczu zbliżającej się wojny z Prusami, zrezygnowali z projektu.

* The source research carried out in London for this article was made possible by the generosity of The De Brzezie Lanckoronki Foundation. My sincere thanks go to Chairman Piotr Chłapowski and Professor Włodzimierz Mier-Jędrzejowicz, who (while we were dealing with formal matters in August 2022) honoured me with a guided tour of POSK – a living manifestation of the inexhaustible Polish creative force. I would also like to express my gratitude to Professor Richard Butterwick-Pawlikowski, who provided a kind and helpful review, and to the staff of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences, who handle scholarship-related matters. I was able to complete my source research thanks to Professor Andrzej Nowak. I would also like to thank Mikołaj Krukowski for all his help when ‘In London, then, I mused on this’.

Publication subsidised from public funds by the Minister of Education and Science as part of the special purpose grant from the Ministry of Education and Science ‘Faces and Metamorphoses of Russian Empires (333 years: 1689–2022). Research conducted by the Team for Comparative Research on Russian Imperialism’.

Outline of content: In 1751, Russia began to organise the colony of New Serbia in Zaporizhia, which provoked tensions with Austria, as the settlers came from its territories. In turn, the construction in 1754 of the Fortress of St Elisabeth on the Ingul River sparked a protest from Turkey, which considered it to be a breach of the Treaty of Belgrade (1739). The conflict posed a risk of war, which is why British and Austrian diplomats sought to calm the situation and prevent France from exploiting the dispute. London feared that a Russo-Turkish war would weaken Russia, its ally in the defence of Hanover. Russia tactically abandoned its plan to construct the fortress in late 1754, which the British regarded as their diplomatic success. After concluding a subsidy convention with London in 1755, the Russians planned to return to the matter, but in 1756, when they faced an impending war with Prussia, they abandoned the project entirely.

Słowa kluczowe: Wielka Brytania, Rosja, Turcja, Austria, Rzeczpospolita, twierdza

Keywords: Great Britain, Russia, Turkey, Austria, Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, stronghold

Throughout ‘the long eighteenth century’, Russia sought conquests in Europe in three, clearly separate (though interconnected) directions: Swedish (Baltic), Polish (Continental), and Turkish (Black Sea). The process ended in 1815, with the empire’s borders reaching the Åland Islands, Kalisz, and Chişinău. This trivial observation may serve as a prelude to another, less evident in historiography, that in the period between Peter I and Catherine II (1725–1762), none of these directions was neglected by Russia’s ruling elites. Thus, all elements of the conquest and development of new territories by the empire should be accurately and comprehensively described and interpreted.

The French historian Albert Sorel has noted that the Russo-Turkish rivalry was reflected in many other matters of European importance. Given the mutual relations between the superpowers, “there was no European issue that did not exert some influence in the East or was not itself influenced by the Eastern intricacies”. Similarly, Richard Butterwick-Pawlikowski has noted, specifically with regard to the issue referred to in the title, that “the explanation of why the British leaders took an interest in this supposedly distant dispute [over the construction of the Fortress of St Elisabeth] and tried to prevent it from escalating testifies to the high degree of integration of the entire system of European powers at the time”.¹ Looking at the problem from the perspective of the Viennese Burg, Canadian historian Harvey Leonard Dyck noted:

¹ A. Sorel, *La question d’Orient au XVIIIe siècle: le partage de la Pologne et le traité de Kainardji* (Paris, 1877); id., *Kwestia wschodnia w XVIII wieku. Pierwszy podział Polski i traktat kainardzyski*, ed. J. Pajewski (Warszawa, 1981), p. 23 (1st Polish edn: Lwów 1903); R. Butterwick-Pawlikowski, Research project recommendation, 2021.

The story of this crisis is worth examining primarily because it helped crystallise key features of the explosive Eastern Question. This side of the crisis, however, has generally been ignored, as have its diplomatic aspects, because the Russian government finally drew back from the New Serbian adventure before it could spark a war. Austrian state papers document this incident in detail and illuminate its broader significance as an important harbinger of change in Eastern European relations.²

Therefore, it seems worthwhile to look (also from the perspective of London's Whitehall) at the issues associated with Russia's attempt to develop and fortify the territory it had captured from Turkey in 1739. The matter caused a severe international crisis, but, for objective reasons, a survey of Russian archives that may present the case from St Petersburg's perspective (published Russian sources do not guarantee that the topic will be exhausted) must be postponed. The choice of the British perspective is justified by the fact that, from London's point of view, the Russo-Turkish conflict in the period was, along with the subsidy negotiations, one of the two 'capital points' of the British diplomat Colonel Melchior Guy Dickens' mission in Russia.³ Moreover, the two points were quite closely linked, for owing to its involvement in the conflict with the Porte, Russia would not be able to fulfil its obligations to defend Hanover. Following the case closely, Frederick II even concluded (not without reason) that it was a factor hampering the subsidy negotiations.⁴ Another noteworthy fact is that this was the last major crisis in which the springs of European diplomacy still worked strictly according to the order of the 'old system', the end of which would soon be brought about by the 'Diplomatic Revolution'. It cannot, therefore, be played down in research into the origins of this historical phenomenon, in which decisions taken at Whitehall were often key.⁵

Yet scholars studying British-Russian relations in the period have treated the case of the Fortress of St Elisabeth as a marginal issue;⁶ the historian of the British

² H.L. Dyck, 'New Serbia and the Origins of the Eastern Question, 1751–1755: A Habsburg Perspective', *Russian Review*, 40, no. 1 (1981), pp. 1–19.

³ "And I can, at present, add nothing to what I have already written to you, upon the two capital points depending, viz. the negotiation with His Majesty, and the dispute with the Ottoman Porte", The National Archives, Kew, Richmond (hereinafter: TNA), SP 91/59, Holderness to Guy Dickens, London-Whitehall, 22 Oct. 1754.

⁴ "Au surplus, il n'a du tout été question jusqu'ici, à ce qu'on m'assure, touchant la négociation des subsides, l'importante affaire de la forteresse Elisabeth ayant suspendu apparemment toutes les autres", *Politische Correspondenz Friedrichs des Grossen*, vol. 11, ed. A. Naudé (Berlin, 1883), pp. 9–12 (No. 6591), Frederick II to J.W. von Klinggräffen, Berlin 11 Jan. 1755.

⁵ The most recent study on the 'Diplomatic Revolution' (K. Schweizer, 'The Duke of Newcastle and the Diplomatic Revolution, 1753–1757: A Historical Revision', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 28, no. 2 [2017], pp. 167–194) does not raise the issue of the Fortress of St Elisabeth at all.

⁶ D.B. Horn, *Sir Charles Hanbury Williams and European Diplomacy* (London–Bombay–Sydney, 1930); H.H. Kaplan, *Russia and the Outbreak of the Seven Years' War* (Berkeley–Los Angeles, 1968); P. Hanczewski, *Dyplomacja brytyjska w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1748–1756* (Toruń, 2001). Cf. A.M. Ганул, 'Іван Хорват як очільник Нової Сербії у сучасній британській та американській історіографії', *Славістична збірка*, vol. 3 (Kyiv, 2017), pp. 204–213.

embassy in Constantinople even failed to notice it.⁷ This is hardly surprising, given that the problem has not received the attention it deserves from historians. Some attention has been paid to it by the Bulgarian scholar Rumiana Mikhneva,⁸ and a separate study on the matter was produced by the Russian historian Maksim Anisimov, whose paper, although valuable and based on Russian sources, seems far from being exhaustive (the author did not notice the Russians' tactical concession in late 1754 and early 1755).⁹ The topic has also appeared incidentally in several other studies.¹⁰

The present article is based on an analysis of documents stored at The National Archives in London, State Papers: 80 (Empire/Austria 194, 195); 88 (Poland/Saxony 76, 77); 91 (Russia 58, 59, 60, 61); 97 (Turkey 37, 38).

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On 18 September 1739, a Russo-Turkish peace treaty was signed in Belgrade, with an Austro-Turkish treaty being concluded at the same time, and France acting as a mediator and guarantor of both treaties. New Russo-Turkish borders were drawn and then established on the ground.¹¹ As a result, Russia recovered the territory of Zaporizhzhia on the right bank of the Dnieper.¹² In 1751, the Russians began to settle these territories (New Serbia) with Serbs from the Austro-Turkish borderland. To protect the new settlers, a decision was made to build a new fortress on the Ingul River, named after Saint Elisabeth in honour of the Russian tsarina.¹³

⁷ A.C. Wood, 'The English Embassy at Constantinople, 1660–1762', *English Historical Review*, 40 (1925), pp. 533–561.

⁸ Р. Михнева, *Россия и Османская империя в международных отношениях в середине 18 в. (1739–1756)* (Москва, 1985).

⁹ М.Ю. Анисимов, 'Дело о строительстве российской крепости святой Елизаветы в международной политике середины XVIII в.', *Вестник Московского государственного областного университета*, no. 5 (2016), pp. 71–80. Cf. id., *Российская дипломатия в Европе в середине XVIII века. От Ахенского мира до Семилетней войны* (Москва, 2012).

¹⁰ J. von Hammer-Purgstall, *Geschichte des osmanischen Reiches*, vol. 8: 1739–1774 (Pest, 1832); A. Ritter von Arneth, *Geschichte Maria Theresia's*, vol. 4: *Maria Theresia nach dem Erbfolgekriege: 1748–1756* (Wien, 1870); С.М. Соловьев, *История России с древнейших времен*, кн. XII, т. 23–24 (Москва, 1964) (1st edn: 1873–1874); Е.Н. Щепкин, *Русско-австрийский союз во время Семилетней войны 1746–1758 г.г.: Исследование по данным Венского и Копенгагенского Архивов* (С-Петербург, 1902); F. Bilici, *La politique française en mer Noire (1747–1789): vicissitudes d'une implantation* (Istanbul, 1992).

¹¹ Михнева, *Россия и Османская империя*, pp. 28–70. A recent study by А.Г. Гуськов, К.А. Кочегаров, С.М. Шамин (*Русско-туркская война 1686–1700 годов* [Москва, 2022]) has brought many valuable findings for the earlier period.

¹² Russo-Turkish peace treaty, Belgrade, 18 Sep. 1739, *Полное Собрание законов Российской империи с 1649 года*, vol. 10: 1737–1739, (Санкт-Петербург, 1830), pp. 899–904 (no. 7900). Cf. *Recueil d'Actes Internationaux de l'Empire Ottoman*, vol. 1: 1300–1789, ed. G. Noradounghian (Paris, 1897), pp. 258–265; *Договоры России с Востоком. Политические и торговые*, ed. Т. Юзефович (Санкт-Петербург, 1869), pp. 15–24.

¹³ Жалованная Грамота генерал-майору Ивану Хорвату, 11/22 Jan. 1752, *Полное Собрание законов*, vol. 13: 1749–1753 (Санкт-Петербург, 1830), pp. 581–585 (no. 9924). Cf. Е.В. Белова,

The resettlement of Serbs to Russia, initiated by Ivan Horvat, initially complicated the relations between Russia and Austria.¹⁴ The construction of the fortress brought the Turkish factor into the picture.

In May 1754, a dispatch arrived in London from the British resident in Constantinople, James Porter. He reported that the Turks, despite their peaceful attitude, were intensely bitter about Russia's actions in Zaporizhzhia. The Porte's dragoman, Ioan Teodor Callimachi, informed the British and Austrian diplomats (Heinrich von Penckler – often spelt Benckler in English sources) that the Ottoman court was outraged at the Russians, who were questioning the source of the fact (confirmed from another source) that a fortress was being constructed in a country between Russia and Poland that should remain neutral. Porter wrote extensively about the peaceful attitude of Sultan Mahmud I, who instructed the defterdar (Halimi Mustafa Pasha) to tone down the fervour of the reis efendi (Abdi Efendi). The British diplomat stressed that efforts should be taken to cultivate the Turks' peaceful attitude, yet the Russian diplomat at the Porte, Alexei Obreskov, completely disregarded this.¹⁵ A month and a half later, Porter informed Whitehall that Obreskov had reassured the Turks by telling them that the construction of the fortress was a lie. The dispatch was, for the first time, addressed to the new Secretary of State for the Southern Department, Thomas Robinson.¹⁶

However, some immensely worrying news arrived in London from the Bosphorus in early August. Obreskov told Porter (22 June) that he had officially informed the Porte of his court's intention to build a fortress on the Ingul River. On that same day, Porter and Penckler received, through their dragomans, an official note from the reis efendi, which stressed that the prerequisite for Russo-Turkish peace was respect for the treaties and that the Russian investment was in breach of them. The Porte therefore asked the British and imperial diplomats to mediate, as they were representatives of states friendly to both sides of the dispute.¹⁷ The reis efendi warned Porter that the Porte's ministers had carefully considered Russia's intentions and that some of them were outraged by the treaty violation. It was

‘Границы Новой Сербии: южнославянская колонизация России в 1740–1760-е гг.’, *Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов*, no. 1 (2008), pp. 82–94; А.М. Ганул, ‘Адміністративні повноваження Івана Хорвата у Новій Сербії (1752–1762)’, *Вісник Київського національного університету імені Тараса Шевченка. Історія*, 130, no. 3 (2016), pp. 18–23.

¹⁴ Щепкин, *Русско-австрийский союз*, pp. 142–144; Дюк, ‘New Serbia’, pp. 2–12; Анисимов, *Российская дипломатия*, pp. 115–126.

¹⁵ TNA, SP 97/37, Porter to Holderness, Constantinople, 1 Apr. 1754 (rcv. 11 May). Obreskov reported the Turkish concern about the Russian construction as early as February, see Анисимов, ‘Дело о строительстве’, pp. 72–73.

¹⁶ TNA, SP 97/37, Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 15 May 1754 (rcv. 24 June). Robinson took office on 23 March 1754, with the Earl of Holderness taking over the Northern Department.

¹⁷ Ibid., Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 27 June 1754 (rcv. 5 Aug.); *ibid.*, appendix, Turkish note presented to the British resident, ‘Exposition à notre ami l’ambassadeur d’Angleterre demeurant à la Sublime Porte’.

clear from the note that they were not afraid of armed confrontation and were considering appealing to France, the treaty guarantor.¹⁸ On the other hand, the more cautious dignitaries opposed involving the Court of Versailles in the matter and opted to rely solely on the mediation of the imperial and British diplomats, who were interested in keeping the peace. This was the background of the Turkish note.¹⁹ According to the Englishman's report, he and his imperial colleague found themselves in a difficult situation, forced to rule on such an important matter. First of all, they advised the Turks not to involve the French, as the latter would certainly start stirring things up. In addition, efforts to de-escalate the conflict were facilitated by the sultan's preference for peace. An analysis of the documents has confirmed that the Turkish protests against the construction of the Fortress of St Elisabeth had no legal grounds. Such conclusions, along with a desire to reassure the Turks, led to the drafting of a reply, the text of which was accepted by Obreskov. While agreeing that the Turks were right in demanding restrictions on the construction of fortresses in the Don and Kuban estuaries, Porter's letter stressed that there were no such restrictions elsewhere. Thus, the Turks were free to build fortresses as well.²⁰ Next, Porter analysed the attitudes of the most important Turkish dignitaries. The Grand Vizier, Köse Bahir Mustafa Pasha (in office from 1752 until 16 February 1755), was a serious but determined man. At risk of dismissal, he may have hoped that the confusion might delay it, as he demonstrated that the empire needed to remain combat-ready. The reis efendi, as a true Turk, hated the infidels. However, the defterdar was in favour of peace and thus likely to be satisfied with the contents of Porter's reply. It was, therefore, necessary to defuse the tension by all means. Russia should withdraw honourably from the enterprise, because otherwise no one could guarantee that the Turks would remain calm.²¹

¹⁸ "The former told mine that the ministers of the Porte had assiduously and attentively considered the court of Russia's intentions, that some were for resenting this breach of treaty highly, that the grand signior had large treasures, the soldiery were tired of peace, and that a good army would be soon raised. That they should call on the French ambassador as a guarantee of the treaty, and knew his opinion, in a word, not to receive the law in a point of this importance", TNA, SP 97/37, Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 27 June 1754 (rcv. 5 Aug.).

¹⁹ TNA, SP 97/37, Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 27 June 1754 (rcv. 5 Aug.).

²⁰ Ibid., Porter do Robinson, Constantinople, 27 June 1754 (rcv. 5 Aug.); *ibid.*, appendix, Potrer's reply to the Turkish note 'Exposition ou réponse de s.e. l'ambassadeur d'Angleterre à la Porte': "mais il ne paraît pas que les parties contractantes sont en aucune manière restreintes de bâtir sur quelque autre lieu de la frontière éloigné de ces deux forteresses et qui leur semblera convenable. Puisque celle de Circaschi paraît être substituée de la part de la Russie en lieu d'Azoff et la forteresse de Coban bâtie par la Sublime Porte pour sa propre commodité et utilité, de sorte que si les parties veulent s'étendre à d'autres lieux des frontières les plus éloignés pour y bâtir des forteresses excepté dans ces lieux stipulés dans les traités elles ont toutes les deux un droit égal de le faire et il ne semble du tout point que cela aye à troubler la paix ni à y porter préjudice, et si la Sublime Porte trouvoit à propos de faire la même chose l'amitié l'harmonie et la bonne intelligence ne devraient point pour cela être en aucune façon interrompues".

²¹ Ibid., Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 27 June 1754 (rcv. 5 Aug.).

The diplomat analysed information on the Russo-Turkish exchange of positions over the previous two years. The provisions of the Belgrade treaty were interpreted by the Turks as a general ban on the construction of border fortresses, except for the two mentioned in the treaty. The Russians, on the other hand, were of the opinion that the provisions concerned solely the estuaries of the Don and the Kuban Rivers. The Russian position was that the new fortress would prevent haydamaks' attacks.²²

Soon (29 June), the reis efendi declared to the imperial dragoman (the British dragoman was ill at the time) that the Porte was profoundly displeased with the position of the diplomats representing the London and Vienna courts. The grand vizier apparently could not comprehend how residents with such discernment and experience, working to preserve peace, could fail to understand the Porte's position. Especially given that their duty was to preserve the friendship between Russia and Turkey, which was only possible if the treaties were respected.²³ At the same time, as Porter reported, Obreskov bluffed that he had received new instructions and, on this pretext, he declared to the Porte that the borders were completely calm. The Russian resident agreed with Porter that if the Turks brought the French and the Swedes into the matter of the fortress, this would be very bad, which is why he tried to convince the Porte of the benefits of British and Austrian mediation. The Englishman hoped, therefore, that Obreskov would also seek to persuade his court to give up the investment. On the other hand, he argued to his superiors that London's influence on the Bosphorus, in the event of a favourable settlement of the matter, would be markedly strengthened in the future, outdistancing the gains of the French following the recent mediation on the Peace of Belgrade.²⁴

In summing up the matter, Porter reported that the Turks clearly stressed to the imperial and the British dragoman (Pisani) that they were expecting the two mediating courts to be sympathetic to the Porte's stance on the construction of the fortress. The matter was further complicated by the fact that the Russian resident's assessment of the situation was false, as he believed the Porte's tough stance was solely the result of the reis efendi's initiative. In fact, according to Porter, it stemmed from the sultan's will, which made the situation particularly dangerous.

²² Ibid., Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 1 July 1754 (rcv. 2 Aug.). As can easily be verified, the distance between Kropyvnytskyi and Ochakov is about 210 km, and between Kropyvnytskyi and Bender is about 280 km. In such a case, the distance per hour is sometimes 3.68 km and sometimes 4.66 km. This is why it is worth emphasising the complete unreliability of such data.

²³ "From this verbal declaration, you may see, Sir, that they not only do, but are determined to understand the building of any fortress, as a breach of treaties, and that they would have us take it in the same sense", TNA, SP 97/37, Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 1 July 1754 (rcv. 2 Aug.).

²⁴ "It would be a most essential point gained, Sir, if the court of Russia could be brought to desist from their undertaking. The king's influence with this court would be so strengthened as to be infinitely superior to that acquired by the French, at the last mediation, and would throw them, for the future, entirely into our hands", *ibid.*, Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 1 July 1754 (rcv. 2 Aug.).

In addition, Obreskov seemed to be gripped with resentment (“vehement jealousy”) about the position of Penckler, whose attitude was ambiguous. Porter himself had hopes for Guy Dickens’ activity in St Petersburg.²⁵

At the same time, London received dispatches from the British minister in Vienna, Robert Keith, who immediately recognised the seriousness of the crisis in the Russo-Turkish relations. The diplomat stressed that Austrian Chancellor Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz was deeply moved by Penckler’s reports on the matter. The Austrian chancellor was apparently critical of St Petersburg’s actions, as they jeopardised the common cause by creating the danger of a Turkish war in which Austria would also have to take part. He was also critical of the Russian ministers, considering the Austrian and British mediation in the dispute, as well as an appropriate *démarche* in St Petersburg, necessary; he wanted the diplomats of the Saxon-Polish court involved as well.²⁶

Immediately upon receiving this information, Whitehall issued extensive directives to its embassy in St Petersburg, stressing that the Russo-Turkish crisis could have dire consequences. The Earl of Holderness strongly emphasised the Porte’s peaceful attitude, which could be put to the test by the construction of the fortress. He was in no doubt that Guy Dickens, when faced with the threat of a worsening crisis, would demand an explanation from Chancellor Bestuzhev. The ambassador was asked for his opinion, and George II offered to help prevent the conflict from escalating. By asking the Austrian and British representatives for mediation, and keeping this secret from the French and Swedish diplomats, the Turks showed respect to Russia. According to Whitehall, the object of the dispute was of secondary importance to Russia, and such a matter was not worth the great risk of war. Meanwhile, “if Her Russian Majesty were at war with the Turks, she

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 7 July 1754 (rcv. 2 Aug.); *ibid.*, appendix: Porter to Guy Dickens, Constantinople, 6 July 1754. At the same time, a lengthy report to St Petersburg with details of the negotiations with the Turks was also sent by Obreskov, who wrote that “this matter, Your Majesty, has become much more serious here than it might appear. [...] The Porte, it would seem, having become desperate that it would not be possible to win me over to its position and persuade me to propose to Your Imperial Majesty to abandon the enterprise, has seen fit to turn with the matter to the English ambassador Porter and the Roman Imperial envoy Baron Penckler”. Penckler was completely confused; he did not know what to do and wanted to wait for his court’s decision. “The British Ambassador, Porter, unequivocally agreed with my view that they should receive a reply. And so, after lengthy deliberations and conferences, with my consent”, Porter replied in writing. At the end of his very lengthy report, Obreskov presented to St Petersburg his own clear arguments against the construction of the fortress, stressing that in the event of a war, the allies would fail, for the Porte had taken steps to present itself as the attacked party; *Архив Князя Воронцова*, book 25 (Москва, 1882), A. Obreskov to Elisabeth, Constantinople, 26 June/7 July 1754 [Report no. 17, rcv. 25 July/5 Aug.], pp. 183–192, 194–199. Cf. Михнева, *Россия и Османская империя*, pp. 108–111.

²⁶ TNA SP 80/194, Keith to Holderness, Vienna, 13 and 23 July 1754 (second dispatch marked ‘Turkey and Russia’) (rcv. 5 Aug. and 2 Aug.). On 22 July 22 Kaunitz sent a rescript to Esterhazy, calling on the Russians to end the conflict with Turkey; Щепкин, *Русско-австрийский союз*, pp. 214–215.

would be too much employed in that quarter, to be able to interfere in the affairs of Christendom". Whitehall also suggested that formal and legal considerations were less important than the practical dimension of the matter.²⁷ The much more modest instructions to Keith on the Russo-Turkish crisis referred to the directives for Guy Dickens ("under flying seal"). The diplomat was ordered to demand that Kaunitz issue instructions to the imperial ambassador, Miklós Esterházy de Galántha, in St Petersburg, and to Penckler in Constantinople.²⁸ In his dispatch to Porter Robinson, he stressed George II's satisfaction with the actions taken by the diplomat, especially given the fact that the matter was sensitive and important.²⁹

Two weeks after the instructions described above were sent, more information arrived from Constantinople. The grand vizier expressed his hope for British assistance in resolving the conflict, while declaring Turkey's desire to maintain peace. However, Obreskov claimed that if the Porte requested that construction be stopped solely to preserve friendship, St Petersburg would immediately agree. Yet the matter was complicated by the Ottomans' confrontational stance, which claimed that Russia had violated the treaty provisions. A detailed analysis of the issue of border fortresses showed that the Turks were highly principled on the matter.³⁰

Having received the instructions in question, the British ambassador in Vienna informed Kaunitz of London's position. The letters that came from Constantinople showed "that the Turks continue in their pacific disposition, and expect a favourable determination of the affair between them and the court of Russia, by means of His Majesty's good offices, God grant the Russians may be as reasonable on their side, and them that business will end, as it ought to do, in an amicable manner".³¹

Guy Dickens warned Bestuzhev that if Russia did not abandon its investment, a war was inevitable. According to his report for Whitehall, the chancellor was fully aware of the danger, and Dickens hoped that the new settlement would soon be moved elsewhere.³² A new rescript to the St Petersburg outpost was sent

²⁷ TNA SP 91/58, Holderness to Guy Dickens, London-Whitehall, 6 Aug. 1754 (two dispatches, one of them marked 'secret'); *ibid.*, appendix: 'Exposition à notre ami l'ambassadeur d'Angleterre demeurant à la Sublime Porte'.

²⁸ TNA, SP 80/194, Holderness to Keith, London-Whitehall, 6, 9 Aug. 1754; appendix: Robinson to Porter, 6 Aug. 1754, no text in this codex.

²⁹ TNA SP 97/37, Robinson to Porter, London-Whitehall, 6 Aug. 1754; *ibid.*, appendix: Holderness to Guy Dickens and Keith, London-Whitehall, 6 Aug. 1754.

³⁰ "The Russian minister is greatly pleased with my management; he came to me to express his obligation, and pretends my paper has been of infinite service with the grand seignor, and the well intentioned", TNA, SP 97/37, Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 15 July (quotation), 1 Aug. 1754 (rcv. 19 Aug., 6 Sept.). Obreskov reported to St Petersburg (8/19 July) that Penckler had told the Turks that Russia had the right to build the fortress, but 'inside he thought otherwise'. He and Porter tried to convince the Russians to abandon the construction, fearing their countries would get involved in the Russo-Turkish war; Анисимов, 'Дело о строительстве', p. 73.

³¹ TNA, SP 80/194, Keith to Holderness, Vienna, 26 Aug. 1754 (rcv. 6 Sept.).

³² TNA, SP 91/58, Guy Dickens to Holderness, St Petersburg, 6/17 Aug. 1754 (rcv. 12 Sept.). Around the same time, Bestuzhev made a note on Obreskov's report, which shows that he had spoken

the day after this news was received. The diplomat's actions were approved, and hopes were expressed for Bestuzhev's common sense.³³

Subsequent news from St Petersburg was that Esterhazy had raised the issue of the disputes with Turkey during his conference with Bestuzhev. The chancellor was said to have completely distanced himself from the fortress project and promised to persuade the empress to abandon the idea. At the same time, a positive change in the Russian dignitary's attitude towards matters related to the British-Russian subsidy negotiations gave Guy Dickens reason to believe that it was correlated with Turkish affairs.³⁴

In its reply, Whitehall also raised some Polish issues. It was reported that among the agents recruited by the French were two former collaborators of Filip Orlik. This provided a context for a reminder of the concerns about France's actions in the event of an interregnum in Poland, as well as for strongly reiterated arguments that, in such circumstances, the only way to prevent a war with Turkey would be to abandon the plan to build the Fortress of St Elisabeth. The reply concluded by noting that Russia needed its allies to remain secure.³⁵ In the first directives, sent on the same

to Guy Dickens quite frankly, as he was in favour of halting the investment. Yet the chancellor also saw the dangers associated with the British and Austrian mediation. In addition, he pointed to another danger: a rapprochement between Prussia and Turkey. Frederick II had sought it for many years, and now Russia itself would hand him the tools. "The consequences of this, especially taking into account the possible stirring up of Polish affairs, seem worthy of consideration, and, in a word, require mature consideration and attention. [...] This [that is, giving up the plan to build the fortress] would show friendship to the Porte and would make it possible to forestall the allies so that they would not attribute this friendship to their efforts", *Архив Князя Воронцова*, A. Bestuzhev's note on Obreskov's Report No. 17/1755, pp. 192–194. Russian historians, analysing the notes and signs left by Russian chancellors on the pages of Obreskov's reports, have demonstrated that the difference of views regarding the construction of the fortress between Bestuzhev and Vorontsov was real. Vorontsov wrote: "The construction of the St Elizabeth fortress will be of great benefit to Russia in the future and will keep the Turks bridled", Соловьев, *История России*, pp. 228–232; Анисимов, 'Дело о строительстве', p. 74.

³³ TNA SP 91/58, Holderness to Guy Dickens, London-Whitehall, 13 Sept. 1754; *ibid.*, appendix: Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 15 July 1754.

³⁴ "In the meanwhile, we both have hopes that they begin to open their eyes to their true interest, and that the affairs with Turkey have made them sensible, that their power, great as it is, is not so formidable as to suffer them to believe that they stand in need of no friend or ally", TNA, SP 91/58, Guy Dickens to Holderness, St Petersburg, 13/24 Aug. 1754 (rcv. 16 Sept.).

³⁵ "These information ought to be the more attended to by the Russian ministers, as it is a fresh indication, of the resolution of France to take an immediate share in the succession of the crown of Poland, upon a vacancy in that throne, and is providing beforehand, with the utmost care and diligence, to facilitate her schemes when the event shall happen, by raising such disturbances in different quarters, as might divert those powers, whose interest it is to oppose her views, from taking an active part to frustrate them. But as you have already received His Majesty's commands upon this subject, and that the great chancellor has expressed an inclination to talk over the affairs of Poland with you. It is unnecessary to enlarge upon them at present, and the king is in expectation of the result of your conference with M. de Bestucheff", TNA SP 91/58, Holderness to Guy Dickens, London-Whitehall, 20 Sept. 1754.

day to Ambassador Charles Hanbury Williams, who had recently been reappointed to the court of Augustus III, Holderness briefed the diplomat on the basic elements of the Russo-Turkish crisis and on British diplomatic efforts to prevent it from escalating. As the expectation was that “this affair will probably have made some noise in Poland”, the diplomat was told to be on his guard and was also informed about the concerns relating to the actions of Ivan Mazepa’s former followers.³⁶

On 23 September, the mood in Whitehall became somewhat more optimistic when a letter from Porter arrived, reporting that the Turks were not pleased with their own note on the Russian construction project. This was a blow to the reis efendi, whose position was under threat if there was no satisfactory reply from St Petersburg. On the other hand, Obreskov assured Penckler that he had requested concessions from his court.³⁷ Guy Dickens, reporting that the Russians were planning to send a courier to Obreskov, stated that a decision was taken to abandon construction of the fortress.³⁸ In turn, during the Russian diplomat in Warsaw, Heinrich Gross, and Williams the Welshman’s conversation, was assured that Russia realised it was not worth confronting Turkey over such a trivial matter.³⁹

The concerns soon returned. Guy Dickens reported that he had been informed by the Russians of the content of the instructions sent to Obreskov regarding the Turkish protests against the construction of the fortress. St Petersburg expressed surprise at the Porte’s opposition to the Russian plan, as the investment was essential to maintaining security and was not contrary to the treaties, which is why Russia could not abandon it. Yet when commenting on the issue, the British diplomat concluded that while a tough stance was being demonstrated, the Russians would try to avoid an escalation of the conflict, while preserving the dignity of Russia’s ruler.⁴⁰

Whitehall replied, stressing that the tone of the instructions sent to Obreskov in the matter of the conflict with the Turks was not in accordance with London’s wishes.

³⁶ TNA SP 88/76, Holderness to Williams, London-Whitehall, 20 Sept. 1754, fols 25–28v; *ibid.*, fols 29–30v, 31–32v, appendices: ‘Exposition à notre ami l’ambassadeur d’Angleterre demeurant à la Sublime Porte’; ‘Exposition ou réponse de s.e. l’ambassadeur d’Angleterre à la Porte’.

³⁷ TNA, SP 97/37, Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 17 Aug. 1754 (rcv. 23 Sept.).

³⁸ TNA, SP 91/58, Guy Dickens to Holderness, St Petersburg, 20/31 Aug. 1754 (rcv. 23 Sept.).

³⁹ TNA, SP 88/76, fols 35–35v, Williams to Holderness, Warsaw, 11 Sept. 1754 (rcv. 27 Sept.).

⁴⁰ “By these orders, it seems, as if this court insists on the right, and necessity, of building the fortress complained of. But I believe I may venture to assure Your Lordship, that they will take great care not to let things come to extremities, and if they do not explain themselves clearly in these orders to their minister, it is because they are not yet agreed about the means and expedients how to give over this inconsiderate, nay, I may call it, this unjust undertaking (the chief view of it being to debauch the sultan’s, and the empress queen’s subjects of the Greek religion), and at the same time act consistently with the empress of Russia’s honour and dignity. One of the expedients talked of, was, to pretend this new settlement is prejudicial to the inhabitants of Ukraine, as in truth it is, and it was even thought they would have been advised underhand to petition against it. But they are so slow, wavering, and unsteady here, in all their resolutions, that there is no depending on anything till it is done”, TNA, SP 91/59, Guy Dickens to Holderness, St Petersburg, 23 Aug./3 Sept. 1754 (rcv. 27 Sept.).

However, some hope came from the diplomat's assurances that Russia was looking for a way to abandon the venture on honourable terms. "I am in great hopes of receiving a more favourable account from you very soon", concluded the secretary of state.⁴¹

On the same day, London received news suggesting that there was a chance of support from Dutch diplomats. The colonel pointed out that, under the Treaty of Belgrade, the legal argument was in Russia's favour. The Turks knew that the Russians intended to 'seduce' the Greek (that is, Orthodox) subjects of the sultan and that they were strengthening their strategic position at the expense of the fortress in Bender. Analysing the situation, the British diplomat concluded that the blame for everything should be laid at the door of factional emulation at the St Petersburg court. This was because Bestuzhev, despite assurances made to Guy Dickens and Esterhazy, was counting on an escalation of the crisis to undermine Shuvalov's position.⁴²

Immediately after arriving in Warsaw, Williams reported that the court of Augustus III, concerned about the Russo-Turkish crisis and recognising Russia's right to build the fortress, ordered its diplomat in St Petersburg, Johan Funcke, to try to dissuade the Russians from the venture. The argument to be used was the sad fate of Poland in the event of a war between the two empires. Their troops, passing through Poland's territory, would bring misery upon the country, even though the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth would not formally take part in the war.⁴³

In connection with the Polish thread, Whitehall immediately alerted its embassy in Constantinople, highlighting the French desire to exploit Hetman Jan Klemens Branicki.⁴⁴ In the reply, Williams received very detailed information "upon the two great points in agitation, that is, the Russo-Turkish crisis and the negotiations for a new subsidy treaty between St Petersburg and London".⁴⁵ Sir Charles replied reassuringly that, in the light of the letters that had arrived at the Polish court from Russia, the situation, according to Bestuzhev, was under control. Gross also gave assurances in Warsaw that there was no danger of further escalation.⁴⁶

⁴¹ TNA, SP 91/59, Holderness to Guy Dickens, London-Whitehall, 1 Oct. 1754.

⁴² TNA, SP 91/59, Guy Dickens to Holderness, St Petersburg, 27 Aug./7 Sept. 1754 (rcv. 1 Oct.).

⁴³ TNA, SP 88/76, fols 38–39, Williams to Holderness, Warsaw, 14 Sept. 1754 (rcv. 1 Oct.).

⁴⁴ TNA, SP 88/76, fols 46v–49v, Williams to Holderness, Warsaw, 18 Sept. 1754 (rcv. 4 Oct.); TNA 97/37, Robinson to Porter, London-Whitehall, 4 Oct. 1754; *ibid.*, appendix: Description of the Ostroh case.

⁴⁵ TNA, SP 88/76, fols 51–52v, 53–58v, Holderness to Williams London-Whitehall, 4 and 8 Oct. 1754; *ibid.* fols 59–60v, 61–62, appendix: Robinson to Porter, London-Whitehall, 4 Oct. 1754, description of the Ostroh case. List of appendices, the copies of which were not included in the codex: *ibid.*, fols 63–64v, W. van Keppal, Earl of Albemarle (British ambassador in Paris) to Robinson, Paris, 2 Oct. 1754; excerpts from the correspondence between Porter and Robinson, 27 June – 4 Oct. 1754; excerpts from the correspondence between Guy Dickens and Holderness, 23 July – 1 Oct. 1754,

⁴⁶ "But at the same time that these orders were dispatched, the great chancellor Bestucheff gave M. Funck the Saxon minister to understand, that in case the Ottoman Porte were not convinced by who the Russian resident had orders to lay before them, he should still find a way to keep matters quiet, and M. Gross is very clear, that this affair will never be carried to extremities on

Meanwhile, Guy Dickens reported that the Russians were waiting for a new reply from the Turks. He said that Esterhazy had asked the chancellor about the crisis with the Turks. Bestuzhev demanded a note containing the instructions received by the representatives of Austria, Britain, and Saxony on the matter.⁴⁷ The colonel learned confidentially that Obreskov had sent extensive reports, including a confession that, to reassure the divan ministers, he had given them the impression that Russia would abandon the venture. The British diplomat did not know whether the Russian envoy's move to Constantinople had been approved by his superiors, but he reported to his capital that the Russians were increasingly nervous about the developments. Bestuzhev was reluctant to have a formal British and Austrian mediation. However, he did not rule out the participation of allied diplomats, "but to keep within the bounds of friendly representations".⁴⁸

On 1 October, the British diplomat discussed Russian issues with Kaunitz. The chancellor took this opportunity to complain about St Petersburg's attitude, which was hard to understand. Delivering a veritable philippic against the relations in Russia, the Austrian chancellor strongly denied the Russian insinuations that Vienna was behind the initiative to incite the Turks against the colonisation of New Serbia with Austrian subjects. The dignitary claimed that he had also tried to convince the Russian ambassador in Vienna, Herman Karl von Keyserling, of this. But, in an act of disloyalty to the Russian ally, "concluded the conversation with saying, that, he believed the best thing that could happen, next to the Turks giving up the point (which was scarcely to be expected), would be, their talking, in a very firm and high strain, it being very possible, that the Russian ministers, who had more of the bully than the hero, might, in that case, give up the point". Such a rude treatment of the Russians by Kaunitz was contrasted in Keith's accounts with information obtained from the Saxon ambassador Karl Flemming, who evidently sought to reassure his British colleague, adding that St Petersburg's ambiguous actions stemmed from the conflict between Elisabeth's wishes and the officials' reluctance to proceed with the investment venture.⁴⁹ On the other hand, news arrived directly from Warsaw that on 29 September (during an audience with Augustus III) Gross expressed satisfaction on behalf of Empress Elisabeth with Saxon actions against the French intrigues in Turkey and Poland.

the side of his court. I wait with impatience to hear it is concluded in an amicable manner", TNA, SP 88/76, fols 70–71, Williams to Holderness, Warsaw, 25 Sept. 1754 (rcv. 16 Oct.).

⁴⁷ TNA, SP 91/59, Guy Dickens to Holderness, St Petersburg, 30 Aug./10 Sept., 3/14, 6/17 Sept. 1754 (rcv. 4, 11, 16 Oct.).

⁴⁸ TNA, SP 91/59, Guy Dickens to Holderness, St Petersburg, 10/21 Sept. 1754 (rcv. 16 Oct.).

⁴⁹ "M. Vonk [sic! – Funck], in his letter to M. Brühl, says, that the majority of the Russian council was, certainly, in their hearts, for desisting from the work, but that, out of flattery to, and fear of offending the czarina, whose favourite project the New Servia is, they had given their votes contrary to their opinions, for continuing the work", TNA, SP 80/194, Keith to Holderness, Vienna, 21 Sept., 2 Oct. 1754 (rcv. 4 Oct., 16 Oct.).

At the same time, the Russian diplomat tried to convince Williams that Russia was not seeking to escalate the conflict with the Ottomans, but could not accept an erroneous interpretation of the treaties.⁵⁰

In view of such news, it is not surprising that in his new instructions to Guy Dickens, the Earl of Holderness stressed the unpredictability of Russia's policy. On the one hand, the St Petersburg court trumpeted (especially in Poland through Gross) its wish to resolve the conflict; on the other hand, the instructions sent to Constantinople testified to the opposite.⁵¹

Porter reported that his new note to the Turks was enthusiastically received by the reis efendi, who "read it with great attention, repeated his thanks, and prayed to God, that the king's efforts might answer His Majesty's good intentions, and have a happy issue". The document strongly emphasised the desire of George II and Maria Theresa to settle the conflict peacefully, praising the Ottomans' peaceful approach, which entrusted the matter to the appropriate courts. However, the diplomat stressed the instability of the Ottoman policy.⁵²

In St Petersburg, when the Russians resumed negotiations on the subsidy treaty with Britain, Guy Dickens reminded them that Whitehall expected the conflict with the Turks to be settled, and he read all his instructions on the matter to Bestuzhev. The Russian chancellor agreed with the British position and suggested abandoning the venture through a petition by the people of Ukraine. In addition, the colonel tried to reassure his superiors that there was no cause for concern about war, as Russia was not ready for it, especially given that it could not count on its allies' support.⁵³

Unexpectedly for the English, a new thread emerged when Keith reported that Keyserling, by a special note signed by both Russian chancellors, requested that Austria refrain from action (*désintéressement*) in the matter of the fortress. This greatly surprised Kaunitz and Vice-Chancellor Rudolf Collaredo, who feared Turkey's rapprochement with France and Prussia. The Russian ambassador distanced himself from such a position of his court and suggested that it was, in fact, contrary to Bestuzhev's views.⁵⁴ Replying to Vienna, the Earl of Holderness stressed the considerable concern of George II caused by Russia's new move. Although the Porte maintained a peaceful attitude towards its Christian

⁵⁰ TNA, SP 88/76, fols 83–84v, Williams to Holderness, Warsaw, 2 Oct. 1754 (rcv. 18 Oct.).

⁵¹ TNA, SP 91/59, Holderness to Guy Dickens, London-Whitehall, 18 Oct. 1754; TNA, SP 88/76, fols 81v–82v, Holderness to Williams, London-Whitehall, 18 Oct. 1754; appendix: excerpt from Guy Dickens' despatch 10/21 Sept. 1754, text missing from the codex.

⁵² "However the intrigues, and precipitancy of the interior of this government are so hidden and obscured, that it is extremely difficult to form a true judgement", TNA, SP 97/37, Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 16 Sept. 1754 (rcv. 22 Oct.); *ibid.*, appendix: Porter's note presented to the Porte, Constantinople, n.d., incipit: L'ambassadeur de Sa Majesté le roi de la Grande Bretagne, ayant été honoré des ordres du roi touchant la confidence...

⁵³ TNA, SP 91/59, Guy Dickens to Holderness, St Petersburg, 17/28 Sept. 1754 (rcv. 22 Oct.).

⁵⁴ TNA, SP 80/194, Keith to Holderness, Vienna, 12 Oct. 1754 (rcv. 29 Oct.).

neighbours, as a result of internal pressure and external intrigues, “the grand signior may be obliged to give way to tumultuous clamours, contrary to his pacific inclination”.⁵⁵

Guy Dickens, too, was sent instructions indicating his superiors’ concern over Keyserling’s request for Austrian *désintéressement* in the matter of the fortress. Vienna’s withdrawal from mediation, Holderness argued, made it easier for French diplomats to set Turkey against the imperial courts. Williams was informed of the news from Vienna and Constantinople, as well as of the instructions sent to Guy Dickens. With an emphasis on the importance of the matter, rather native expectations were expressed that “Monsieur Gross cannot do a more acceptable service to the king, or a more useful one to the empress, his mistress, and to all Europe, than to represent this affair in its true light to the chancellor Bestucheff”.⁵⁶

Two new dispatches by Porter increased the anxiety. In the first, the diplomat suggested that the Turks’ pacifist mood could be counted on at all times, although the issue of fortress construction posed a real threat to peace. The diplomat sought to sound out Constantinople on the matter and tone down its position.⁵⁷ On the other hand, in the appendix to the most secret second dispatch, Porter was sending the French memoranda presented to the Porte nearly two years earlier, which he had obtained. They offered a new anti-Russian and anti-Austrian treaty featuring Prussia and Sweden. Porter stressed that “they [Russians] should be speedily informed, as it may render them more flexible, concerning the fortress”.⁵⁸ Such an alarm corresponded to the news from Warsaw about the extraordinary intensity of French diplomatic intrigues in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Turkey.⁵⁹ In Vienna, Chancellor Kaunitz informed the British ambassador that surprise had been expressed at St Petersburg’s request for Vienna’s *désintéressement* in the matter of the fortress. Kaunitz confessed to Keith that he did not understand the Russian position and could explain it only by an intrigue on the

⁵⁵ Ibid., Holderness to Keith, London-Whitehall, 29 Oct. 1754.

⁵⁶ TNA, SP 91/59, Holderness to Guy Dickens, London-Whitehall, 29 Oct. 1754; TNA, SP 88/76, fols 103–106v, Holderness to Williams, London-Whitehall, 29 Oct. 1754; appendix: ‘extract of a letter, of a fresh date from Mr Porter to sir Thomas Robinson’, text missing from the codex. On the Englishmen’s overestimation of Gross’ role in Russian politics, see T. Szwaciński, ‘Rosyjsko-brytyjskie stosunki dyplomatyczne na sasko-polskim gruncie w przededniu pruskiej agresji. Heinrich Iwanowicz Gross a David Murray wicehrabia Stormont (czerwiec–sierpień 1756)’, *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, 122, no. 3 (2015), pp. 475–508.

⁵⁷ TNA, SP 97/37, Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 1 Oct. 1754 (rcv. 1 Nov.).

⁵⁸ Ibid., Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 1 Oct. 1754 (rcv. 1 Nov.) (‘most secret’). Appendices: Memorandum (in the form of a letter by the French king to the sultan with proposed articles) encouraging the Turks to conclude the treaty, Versailles, 29 Sept. 1752, presented to the Turkish side on 29 Jan. 1753; ‘Motifs’ accusing Russia and Austria of hostile intentions towards the Porte and encouraging a rapprochement with France, n.d., presented to the Turkish side on 3 Feb. 1753. Cf. Hammer-Purgstall, *Geschichte*, pp. 155–157; Wood, *The English Embassy*, pp. 556–557.

⁵⁹ TNA, SP 88/76, fols 107v–113v, fol. 115–117v, Williams to Holderness, Warsaw, 16 (quote), 19 Oct. 1754 (rcv. 1, 4 Nov.).

part of Chancellor Bestuzhev, who wanted to use a Turkish war to discredit his enemies at the Russian court.⁶⁰

All this information caused genuine panic in London. In a lengthy dispatch to Guy Dickens, the Earl of Holderness recapitulated the matter. To provide evidence of danger from France, the Secretary of State attached the French memoranda obtained from Constantinople. Using dramatic phrases, the English insisted that Russia's provocation of Turkey was making it easier for the French to act, and that it had to be explained to Bestuzhev that efforts to get the Porte to accept the construction of the fortress were pointless. It was reiterated that a Russo-Turkish war would be a disaster for St Petersburg and for Vienna, putting these courts at risk of a severe blow from Prussia and France. The diplomat was sent the text of a special note to be presented to the Russian side, which stressed that the objective of the British and Austrian actions was to maintain the peace with Turkey (also because of the dangerous situation in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth), and that putting Turkish patience to the test might have disastrous consequences.⁶¹ At the same time, Guy Dickens was warned that there were doubts whether Vienna could be relied on to be involved in the matter.⁶² Given the increasingly critical situation, Whitehall admitted that, as a last resort, it could increase the subsidies offered to the Russians, but set the condition that signing the treaty would be acceptable only if the conflict with Turkey was resolved. It was emphasised that in the event of a war with the Porte, Russia as an ally would be useless to Britain and that Poland would fall into French hands.⁶³

⁶⁰ "Count Kaunitz said, that, in thinking over the extraordinary conduct of the court of Russia, with respect to this last message, he could not guess what cause to attribute it to, unless it was true what was said of the chancellor Bestucheff's credit being greatly diminished, and in particular of the declaration M. Obrescoff was ordered to make to the Porte, having been resolved upon and carried overbearingly in the senate, in resentment of which, it was possible he (Bestucheff) might have secretly contrived means of pushing them on to this last piece of extravagance, in order to embroil matters so far as to bring on a war, and thereby give him an opportunity of throwing the blame of the whole upon his enemies, and of shewing, that he had judge right in opposing the declaration", TNA, SP 80/194, Keith do Holderness, Vienna, 23 Oct. 1754 (rcv. 4 Nov.).

⁶¹ TNA, SP 91/59, Holderness to Guy Dickens, London-Whitehall, 5 Nov. 1754. Appendices: *ibid.*, Memorandum (in the form of a letter by the French king to the sultan with proposed articles) encouraging the Turks to conclude the treaty, Versailles, 29 Sept. 1752, presented to the Turkish side on 29 Jan. 1753; *ibid.*, 'Motifs' accusing Russia and Austria of hostile intentions towards the Porte and encouraging a rapprochement with France, n.d., presented to the Turkish side on 3 Feb. 1753; draft of the British note to be presented in St Petersburg; J. Porter's reports, Constantinople, 1 Apr., 1 Oct. (most secret).

⁶² TNA, SP 91/59, Holderness to Guy Dickens, London-Whitehall, 5 Nov. 1754 (separate).

⁶³ "But you will, previous to the conclusion of the treaty, expressly declare to the Russian ministers, that you are absolutely forbid to sign it, until the czarina shall have given such satisfaction to the grand signior, as may put a rupture with the Ottoman Porte entirely out of the question. His Majesty being convinced, that, should a war break out between the czarina and the grand signior, the empress of Russia must, of course, draw all her forces to the southern parts of her dominions, and instead of being able to give assistance to her European allies, be herself left

Porter, meanwhile, was told that, despite initial hopes that the dispute could be settled, the Russians' stubbornness boded ill. New evidence of this was the demand for Austrian *désintéressement*. Nevertheless, Porter was ordered to continue his actions in Constantinople (and even to 'redouble' his efforts), even if the Austrians did not decide to act openly.⁶⁴ The instructions to Keith forcefully emphasised the need for joint British-Austrian action in St Petersburg. The prediction was that the Austrians, after possibly submitting some amendments, would join the note that was to be submitted to the Russians.⁶⁵

In November, Keith reported that "private accounts" had arrived from St Petersburg, suggesting that the reis efendi threatened Obreskov that "if he did not, in a very few weeks, bring them a favourable answer upon the subject of the new fortress, the grand signior would not only claim the offers of France in quality of guarantee to the treaty of Belgrade. But would take the measures he shall think proper, for his interest and honour, in order to stop the progress of that work". However, Kaunitz expressed hope that there would be no uncontrolled escalation.⁶⁶

Two days later, an extensive account arrived in London from Constantinople with information about the activities of Austrian diplomats in resolving the Russo-Turkish conflict. Porter, in turn, sought to reassure the Turks that Russia's objective was not escalation and that George II made all the efforts for Elisabeth to adopt a satisfying attitude. In response, the reis efendi assured him of Turkish faith in the best intentions of the court of London. This encouraged the British diplomat to continue to remind the Ottomans to be wary of French instigations, which were, as a rule, hostile to George II and his allies. Obreskov began to linger over fulfilling his instructions, which could lead to escalation. As a result, Porter wrote to Guy Dickens, emphasising the threats to peace, which was probably intended to serve as a warning to the Russians and thus to justify his Russian colleague's reticence before his own superiors.⁶⁷

In a 'voluminous' dispatch recapitulating all the objectives and interests of Williams' mission, the Welshman distinguished three main strands: Russian, Turkish, and Polish. When it came to the Turkish affairs, Sir Charles, repeating hackneyed

a prey to the invasions of Sweden and Prussia. The Kingdom of Poland would, necessarily, fall under the absolute influence of the court of France, and Russia remain surrounded with powerful enemies on all sides, without any possibility of receiving assistance from these powers, who would wish to give it her", TNA, SP 91/59, Holderness to Guy Dickens, London-Whitehall, 5 Nov. 1754 (most secret). Cf. P. Hanczewski, *Dyplomacja brytyjska w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1748–1756. Misje w Berlinie, Dreźnie, Petersburgu i Wiedniu* (Toruń, 2001), p. 179.

⁶⁴ TNA SP 97/37, Robinson to Porter, London-Whitehall, 5 Nov. 1754.

⁶⁵ TNA, SP 80/194, Holderness to Keith, London-Whitehall, 5 Nov. 1754.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, Keith to Holderness, Vienna, 2 Nov. 1755 (rcv. 16 Nov.).

⁶⁷ TNA, SP 97/37, Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 16 Oct. 1754 (rcv. 18 Nov.); appendix: *ibid.*, Porter to Guy Dickens, Constantinople, 12 Oct. 1754. On 1/12 Oct. Obreskov warned his superiors in St Petersburg that the Turks treated the Fortress of St Elisabeth as important as Belgrade when it was in Austrian hands; Анисимов, 'Дело о строительстве', p. 74.

observations concerning the conflict between St Petersburg and Constantinople over the construction of the Fortress of St Elisabeth, spoke emphatically and Anglo-centrally:

And the Russian ministers must be very blind indeed, if, after all the proofs they have of the French endeavours to excite the Turks against them, they did not forego a much greater advantage than the building of this fortress, in order to take the Ottoman Councils out of the arms of France to place them in those of His Majesty. Such a mediator is more advantageous to Russia than fifty thousand additional troops, since they must know, that the firmness of the king's friendship is equalled by nothing but the probity of His Majesty's way of acting.⁶⁸

On 3 December, the Earl of Holderness received the translations of the Russian documents, including the rescript for Obreskov with the note he was supposed to hand to the Turkish side ("La cour impériale de Russie se flatte, que la brillante Porte abandonnera le moindre ombrage qu'elle a pris au sujet de cette affaire, et que de son côté, pour le bien public elle ne s'y opposera pas"). Guy Dickens also reported that the Russian ministers were avoiding all discussion of the crisis. London's and Vienna's mediation was rejected, making it impossible for Esterhazy to present the memorandum expressing concerns over possible exacerbations of the Russo-Turkish relations.⁶⁹ In his subsequent dispatches, Guy Dickens stressed that St Petersburg's actions regarding the fortress could appear inconsistent, and it was very difficult to understand the true intentions in all this, also when it came to the issue of allied (primarily Austrian) mediation. Meanwhile, news received directly from Porter convinced the colonel that if the Russian venture continued, a 'rupture' would become inevitable, as he also informed the Russians.⁷⁰

At the same time, news arrived from Constantinople with information about Obreskov receiving new instructions. The Russian resident informed the allied diplomats that he had received a renewed order to hand to the Porte a note upholding Russia's position on the fortress, but in view of the Ottomans' declaration that they were awaiting a response from Austria and Britain, he felt relieved of this duty. Obreskov was generally quite concerned. All the more so given that, as Porter's report suggested, the sultan's new gifts for the Crimean khan, Arslan Giray, were,

⁶⁸ TNA, SP 88/76, fols 126–152v (Turkish matters, fols 136v–140v), Williams to Holderness, Warsaw, 6 Nov. 1754 (rcv. 18 Nov.). Cf. T. Szwaciński, 'Finał sejmu 1754 r. w relacjach rosyjskich i brytyjskich', *Biblioteka Epoki Nowożytnej*, 4 (2016), pp. 163–195.

⁶⁹ TNA, SP 91/59, Guy Dickens to Holderness, St Petersburg, 11/22 Oct. 1754 (rcv. 3 Dec.); *ibid.*, appendices: rescript for Obreskov, St Petersburg, 21 Aug./1 Sept. 1754 (in reply to report no. 17 of 26 June/7 July 1754); note to be handed by Obreskov to the Turkish side (quote); Esterhazy's memorandum on Russo-Turkish relations; Russo-Turkish Peace Treaty of 1739 (Italian-language version); deployment of the Russian troops for 1754–55 (table).

⁷⁰ TNA, SP 91/59, Guy Dickens to Holderness, St Petersburg, 5/16, 12/23 Nov. 1754 (rcv. 14, 21 Dec.). The second report included an extract from Porter's letter (Constantinople, 12 Oct. 1754) handed over to the Russians; cf. Hanczewski, *Dyplomacja*, p. 100.

as was commonly believed in Constantinople, harbingers of war plans. On their part, the Russians did not want Austrian mediation, because they regarded it as biased; they were willing to accept only the British mediation. The British diplomat also stressed that the Russian hopes for the Turks' corruptibility could prove illusory.⁷¹

Responding to the news of the Russian demand of an Austrian *désintéressement*, Williams again expressed exaggerated hopes for Gross' actions, supposedly dictated by the Russian diplomat's desire to render service to the King of England ("I therefore went last night to make him a visit, and found him, as I have always found him, ready to obey any commands from His Majesty with great cheerfulness").⁷² The dispatch to Sir Charles expressed the continuing anxiety in London. The demand for an Austrian *désintéressement* as well as the limited success of his efforts so far prompted George II to make a formal written submission in St Petersburg on the matter of the fortress. When the issue of the Versailles' intrigues arose, Williams' superiors passed copies of the French plans acquired by Porter to him. The Welshman was forbidden to copy the documents, but he was allowed to share his knowledge of them with Gross.⁷³

In Vienna, Kaunitz conveyed to Keith that Maria Theresa was satisfied with George II's continued efforts to improve Russo-Turkish relations. The Austrians accepted the content of the British note to St Petersburg and planned to have it submitted to the Russians also by Esterhazy. However, they did introduce four amendments. Three of them were almost purely cosmetic. The fourth, on the other hand, expressed concern that the Russians might interpret the document as a confirmation of the *casus foederis* between the imperial courts in the event of any conflict with Turkey.⁷⁴

Whitehall sent Guy Dickens assurances of its full approval of his actions. It was also made clear to him that the London court was exasperated by the Russian chancellor's disregard for his duty, considering it almost an insult. The Earl of Holderness reported that the Russian ambassador to London, Pyotr Chernyshev,

⁷¹ "Hence, therefore it is visible, that his only instruction is, the attempt M. Guy Dickens mentions, the argument of weight, which generally prevails at this court, money, if they measure the circumstances of the present times, by the past, when a vizir was absolute, when Peter the Great's fortunes, with this court, was determined by bribery, they will find themselves mistaken. The very opening is dangerous. The reis efendi is too tough a Musselman, and is not to be bought. The vizir would not dare, and the grand signior, in whom all concentrates, is certainly unattainable, should he dare offer, it would only animate their ambition and obstinacy, and his cause is lost", TNA, SP 97/37, Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 2 Nov. (quote), 16 Nov. 1754 (rcv. 14, 21 Dec.); Appendices: *ibid.*, Guy Dickens to Porter, St Petersburg, 18/29 Sept. 1755 (extract); Porter to Guy Dickens, 12 Nov. 1754.

⁷² TNA, SP, 88/76, fols 266–268v, 277v–278v, Williams to Holderness, Warsaw, 25 Nov. (quote), 2 Dec. 1754 (rcv. 14, 20 Dec.).

⁷³ *Ibid.*, fols 286–289v, Holderness to Williams, London-Whitehall, 20 Dec. 1754 (separate).

⁷⁴ TNA, SP 80/194, Keith to Holderness, Vienna, 29 Nov., 11 Dec. 1754 (rcv. 21, 23 Dec.); *ibid.*, appendix: draft of a British note to be presented in St Petersburg with Austrian amendments.

did not demand from the British a *désintéressement* in the matter of the Russo-Turkish crisis.⁷⁵ This did not necessarily bode well, since Kaunitz was convinced that the Turkish game was calculated to involve Austria and Britain as much as possible in mediation in order to sound these courts out on their attitude in the event of a Russo-Turkish war.⁷⁶

* * *

At the same time, the long-awaited news from St Petersburg reached London, seemingly putting an end to the whole problem. By order of the tsarina, a court council was held in St Petersburg (26 and 27 November); its composition, according to the diplomat, corresponded to that of the assembly held in Moscow a year and a half earlier. Although Russian Vice-Chancellor Mikhail Vorontsov (“the chief opponent to pacific measures”) said that the Turks had been incited by external forces, Shuvalov, although the main force behind the venture, called for de-escalation of the conflict with Turkey. Obreskov was to receive relevant orders stipulating that, if necessary, Russia would abandon the construction of the fortress and even move New Serbia to a different location. Five days later, the colonel had a long conversation with Vorontsov. It may have given the impression that the matter remained open, yet the diplomat did not lose hope that the Russians would abandon the venture if Turkey took a categorical stance. In addition, he put a strong emphasis on his own role in changing the Russian position. The instructions for Obreskov were communicated to the British diplomat, who immediately forwarded them to Porter (via the Russian courier). Summarising the Russian position towards the Turks, Guy Dickens highlighted the strong emphasis on the Russian right to build the fortress and the absence of hostile intentions towards the Turks regarding the project. In the name of preserving peace and friendship, the Russians did decide to halt the works. From the perspective of the present analysis, what is particularly interesting is how the matter was presented to the British ally. The Russians declared that their concession was dictated by common allied interests and by a desire to prevent the intrigues of hostile powers on the

⁷⁵ TNA, SP 91/59, Holderness to Guy Dickens, London-Whitehall, 24 Dec. 1754. The Austrians had information that Chernyshev had requested British *désintéressement* in London; Щепкин, *Русско-австрийский союз*, pp. 217, 218.

⁷⁶ “The attention of this court is still turned towards Constantinople. And, I find count Kaunitz is uneasy at the resolution, the Turkish ministers have taken, of receiving their answer directly from our two courts, for, he imagines, their design in it, is, not so much to know our opinion, about the question in dispute, between them and Russia, as, to draw a declaration, from us, of the part we intend to act, if things should come to extremities, between the Turkish and Russian Empires”, TNA, SP 80/194, Keith to Holderness, Vienna, 18 Dec. 1754 (rcv. 30 Dec.). On 2 Dec. 1754, Kaunitz wrote to Emperor Francis: “Turkish affairs have now reached the stage of the greatest crisis. Their consequences can no longer be foreseen”. A war with Turkey would be a disaster for Austrians, that’s why they were very keen to get the British involved in the Russian-Turkish crisis; Dyck, ‘New Serbia’, p. 12–14.

Bosporus. On the other hand, they expected allied diplomats in Constantinople to urge the Turks to drop their demands to demolish the fortifications that had already been built. The colonel felt that, as Austria had been excluded from the matter, the honour of finally resolving the conflict was Britain's.⁷⁷

The following day brought Porter's dispatches, which, combined with the good news from St Petersburg, allowed British diplomats to hope for a golden age on the Bosphorus. The Turks were to give the credit for any Russian concession (about which they obviously did not yet know) to George II. In Porter's report, his own sophisticated and effective strategy was contrasted with Penckler's ineptitude.⁷⁸

The news from St Petersburg and Constantinople sent the champagne corks flying in Whitehall. Shortly after the New Year's Day of 1755, Williams was informed of the success and of the fact that Chernyshev had been the first to inform London of the Russians' new position. The Russian ambassador's declaration was subsequently confirmed by Guy Dickens' dispatches. Writing to Williams, who was being prepared for the ambassadorship in St Petersburg, Holderness said: "I cannot but congratulate you upon the agreeable prospect, which this happy turn in the councils of Russia opens, of a thorough removal of the present misunderstanding between the two empires. [...] The Porte is prepared to receive this resolution of the court of Petersburg, and to do justice to the influence of His Majesty's friendly offices it bringing it about; which cannot but have the most desirable effects, in all future discussions on that side".⁷⁹ Replying directly to St Petersburg, London expressed its full satisfaction at the successful resolution of the matter. The colonel himself received praise and exceptional expressions of appreciation from the capital.⁸⁰ Porter was informed that London was no less pleased with his actions than with Guy Dickens. "As this affair is likely to turn out, it becomes an object of greater importance than could at first be imagined", for reassurance of the Turks, thanks to British mediation, would contribute to an overall improvement of security, undermining the French intrigues in Constantinople. It was necessary to strike while the iron was still hot and seize the opportunity to strengthen British commercial interests in the Levant, especially in competition with the French.⁸¹ Satisfaction was also

⁷⁷ TNA SP 91/59, Guy Dickens to Holderness, St Petersburg, 19/30 Nov., 22 Nov./3 Dec., 26 Nov./7 Dec. 1754 (rcv. 30 Dec.). Esterhazy obtained information about the council from Funck, and then from Dickens. It was tsarina Elisabeth herself who ultimately decided to appease the Porte. Due to the Russian demand for an Austrian *désintéressement*, Esterhazy handed the initiative over to Dickens. The British diplomat (according to Esterhazy's report) forwarded a written note to the Russians, to which he received a response (23 Nov./4 Dec.), a fact of which he did not inform his own court; Щепкин, *Русско-австрийский союз*, pp. 218–221; cf. Dyck, 'New Serbia', pp. 14–15.

⁷⁸ TNA, SP 97/37, Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 22 Nov. 1754 (rcv. 31 Dec.).

⁷⁹ TNA, SP 88/77, fols 6–7v, Holderness to Williams London-Whitehall, 2 Jan. 1755 ('separate').

⁸⁰ TNA, SP 91/60, Holderness to Guy Dickens, London-Whitehall, 3 Jan. 1755.

⁸¹ TNA SP 97/38, Robinson to Porter, London-Whitehall, 7 Jan. 1755; *ibid.*, appendix: Guy Dickens to Holderness, St Petersburg, 26 Nov./7 Dec. 1754; *ibid.*, copy of the instruction with the appendix at the end of the volume.

communicated to Keith. The British–Austrian note on which work had recently been underway in Vienna no longer mattered, as the right decisions had been taken in St Petersburg even before the document arrived. A great British success could, according to Holderness, also benefit the allies, provided they knew how not to waste it.⁸²

Even before the news from St Petersburg reached Constantinople, Porter confirmed that the mood in Turkey was very peaceful. The first reports had already arrived that work on the fortress had been halted, so if the diplomat could assure the Ottomans that the investment would be abandoned entirely, “they will be inexpressibly obliged”. Depressed by an earthquake, French Ambassador Roland Puchot, Count des Alleurs, died on 23 November 1754. Porter wrote a rather fine *in memoriam* to his diplomatic rival, who, as a writer himself, tackled English themes in his writings.⁸³

The subsequent dispatches from Guy Dickens showed that he had received anxious directives (from 5 November) when the matter had already seemed to be positively resolved. The note agreed upon with the Austrians was set aside. However, according to the ambassador, it was necessary to continue warning the Chancellor, Bestuzhev, of the threat posed by French intrigues in Constantinople. The calm in the south brought good prospects for subsidy negotiations: “That, now, the affair with the Turks is over. The other capital point of the negotiation with His Majesty may be reassumed, and brought to a conclusion as soon as possible”.⁸⁴ In Vienna, Keith observed that allaying the Austrians’ fears was all the more desirable, as it coincided with concerns arising from the change on the sultan’s throne.⁸⁵

Because of the vast distance, the auspicious news did not reach Constantinople for a long time. Following his instructions (of 5 November), Porter drafted a note expressing hope for a little more Turkish patience. The document was handed over

⁸² TNA, SP 80/195, fols 12–15v, Holderness to Keith, London–Whitehall, 7 Jan. 1755.

⁸³ “Count Desalleurs, the French ambassador, died on the 23rd past. The terror of the earthquakes we have had occasioned a great shock and relaxation in the solids, already predisposed to receive any impression; it brought on him an intermitting fever, attended with faintings, various incidents in the management of it, hastened his end. He has left large debts, and was interred on the 26th in St Louis’s chapel, adjoining his house, at the particular invitation of his lady, a princess Lubomirska, I, with other foreign ministers, assisted at the funeral. He was a man of great quiet, and tranquillity, prepossessed with projects and schemes of vast extent, and, ardently, desirous of doing something great. Lax and easily disgusted in his pursuit, he was easy and polite. I lived upon that footing with him, and have, on many occasions, received proofs of his good opinion, and in pecuniary commercial discussion, those of uncommon confidence”, TNA, SP 97/38, Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 2 Dec. 1754 (rcv. 8 Jan. 1754). It could be said that the French and English diplomats were fellow men of letters. On Porter’s oeuvre, see M. van den Boogert, ‘James Porter’, in *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History*, vol. 13: *Western Europe (1700–1800)*, ed. D. Thomas, J.A. Chesworth, The History of Christian-Muslim Relations Series, vol. 37 (Leiden–Boston, 2019), pp. 344–349.

⁸⁴ TNA SP 91/59, Guy Dickens to Holderness, St Petersburg, 3/14, 6/17 (quote) Dec. 1754 (rcv. 8, 16 Jan. 1755).

⁸⁵ TNA, SP 80/194, Keith to Holderness, Vienna, 28, 30 Dec. 1754 (rcv. 16, 14 Jan. 1755).

to the dragoman, but by the time it was completed, Sultan Mahmud I had died (13 December 1754) and his half-brother Osman III had ascended the throne. The Turkish dignitaries still in their posts were preoccupied with internal affairs, but their position remained constant – the construction of the Fortress of St Elisabeth was in breach of the Treaty of Belgrade.⁸⁶ The Turks used the French offers in a cunning manner, holding them in reserve to improve their negotiating position, also on the fortress issue.⁸⁷

Following the news of the new sultan's accession to the throne, the Earl of Holderness once again stressed that at such an uncertain time, the resolution of the Russo-Turkish crisis, “solely by His Majesty's interposition”, was particularly beneficial to Britain.⁸⁸ Sir Charles was convinced that the successful outcome was the result of Bestuzhev's victory over Vorontsov and believed the matter to have been definitely resolved. This, too, aroused his undisguised enthusiasm.⁸⁹ Guy Dickens, in turn, reporting on new difficulties with the subsidy treaty negotiations, expressed the hope that this case would also end as successfully as the Russian-Turkish crisis. In doing so, the colonel gave vent to distinct haughtiness: “But if we expect these people should be of any use to us, they must be accustomed to hearing truth

⁸⁶ TNA, SP 97/38, Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 13 Dec. 1754 (rcv. 14 Jan.); appendix: Porter's note [13 Dec. 1754], *ibid.*

⁸⁷ “The Porte's behaviour, on such offers of friendship, from France, is extremely artificial. They seldom, or never, totally reject them, but reserve them for a proper occasion. The reis efendi has more than once dropped, during this unhappy affair of the fortress, particularly to the imperial minister, that they held them in their hands, whenever they would make a proper use of them”, TNA SP 97/38, J. Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 16 Dec. 1754 (‘most secret’, rcv. 17 Jan.); *ibid.*, copy of the dispatch with a wrong date (1755) at the end of the volume.

⁸⁸ TNA, SP 91/60, Holderness to Guy Dickens, London-Whitehall, 21 Jan. 1755; TNA, SP 88/77, fols 16–17v, Holderness to Williams, London-Whitehall, 21 Jan. 1755.

⁸⁹ TNA, SP 88/76, fols 302–304, Williams to Holderness, Warsaw, 16 Dec. 1754 (rcv. 3 Jan. 1755); TNA, SP 88/77, fols 24–24, 53, 68–69v, Williams do Holderness, Dresden, 15 Jan., 12, 19 Feb. 1755 (rcv. 24 Jan., 24, 28 Feb.). At that time, Gross reported to St Petersburg that he had learned from Cornelius Calkoen that Osman III was a “thoughtless” man and that France would try to use him to the detriment of Russia and Austria. “Только граф Бриль, которой о сем приключении мне сообщал, с основательностью рассуждает, что за щастие почитать должно, что по смерти Дезалюрово, при сей перемене Отоманского двора, не присутствует тамо никакой французской министр, тако де, что ВИБ-во по делу строения крепости святяя Елизаветы вашему при Порте резиденту толь дружбно изьясняться всемиловнейше повелевали, что уже оной Порты всякой повод к жалобам пересечен” [Only count Brühl, who informed me of this incident [change on the Ottoman throne], with thoroughness, argues that it should be considered fortunate that after the death of count des Alleurs, with this change in the Ottoman court, no French minister is present there, and that Your Imperial Majesty, in the matter of the construction of the Fortress of St Elisabeth, had most graciously ordered your resident at the Porte to speak so amicably that any cause for complaint from the said Porte has already been eliminated]. Williams informed Gross of British diplomatic activities during the last Russo-Turkish crisis, including information about the French offers to the Turks of 1753, Архив внешней политики Российской Империи МИД РФ [Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire (AVPRI)], f. 79/1, d. 1755/4, fols 9–9v, 12–12v, H. Gross to Elisabeth I, Dresden, 6 (quote), 10 Jan. 1755 (No. 3, 5).

without being offended at it".⁹⁰ In any case, Whitehall treated the success in the Fortress of St Elisabeth affair as an argument for strengthening the British position in Vienna as well.⁹¹ This dovetailed with Keith's report that the Austrians were satisfied with the resolution of the crisis and that "they are very sensible how much they owe to His Majesty's good offices, upon this occasion".⁹²

The arrival of news from St Petersburg was preceded by a tense period of waiting in Constantinople. A courier to Obreskov with information about the Russian decisions arrived on 4 January 1755. However, the Russian diplomat began a rather strange game. On the one hand, he asked the British and Austrian diplomats for advice, showing "great perplexity", because the note he had received from St Petersburg was to be given to the Turks only in extreme need. On the other hand, he did not inform the diplomats of allies that the Russian courier's package also contained letters addressed directly to them (from Guy Dickens and Esterhazy). Porter and Penckler combined their efforts to get the Russian to present the relevant note to the Turks, stressing that the matter was of the utmost urgency. The idea was to ensure that the Ottomans would not see this as a Russian capitulation driven by fears about the new ruler. On 7 January, Obreskov's note was submitted to the sultan's court. It was also of paramount importance to the British diplomat that there should be no doubt that the Turks owed the successful outcome to the mediating courts. His efforts proved unnecessary, as the Turks, in their own euphoria, apparently concluded that, from their point of view, the successful resolution of the crisis was almost exclusively due to George II. It did prove impossible to have the reference to the Treaty of Belgrade removed from Obreskov's note (especially as he had received its complete text), yet the Turks, although they noticed this immediately, did not attach any importance to it.⁹³ Obreskov's manipulation was soon exposed. On 23 January, he brought his British colleague Guy Dickens' letter that had come with the Russian package. "These little arts are common, and do, as they always will, cut their own throat", concluded the diplomat ironically, failing to notice that at the key moment he had no British version of the events in St Petersburg. Replying directly to the instructions (of 7 January), Porter repeated emphatically that this was the end of the crisis and that the British prospects on the Bosphorus were bright.⁹⁴ The new vizier, Hekimoğlu Ali Pasha (in office from 16 February until 19 May), after his arrival in the capital (27 March), became interested in the relations with Russia and granted an audience to Porter, who assured his superiors in Whitehall that the Ottoman "system" was "entirely pacific", which thwarted the intrigues of hostile states.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ TNA, SP 91/60, Guy Dickens to Holderness, St Petersburg, 27 Dec. 1754/7 Jan. 1755, 14/25 Jan. (quote), 21 Jan./1 Feb. 1755 (rcv. 2, 21, 24 Feb.).

⁹¹ TNA, SP 80/195, fols 38–38v, Holderness to Keith, London-Whitehall, 14 Feb. 1755.

⁹² *Ibid.*, fol. 56v–57v, Keith to Holderness, Vienna, 12 Feb. 1755 (rcv. 25 Feb.).

⁹³ TNA, SP 97/38, Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 3, 15 Jan. 1755 (rcv. 16, 24 Feb.).

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 1 (quote), 15 Feb. 1755 (rcv. 17, 25 March).

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 2 Apr. 1755 (rcv. 6 May).

When Guy Dickens received Porter's letter (of 4 January 1755), he noted that his colleague in Constantinople had not yet received his letter informing him of the Russians' decision to abandon the construction of the fortress. Bestuzhev's explanation was torturous. Obreskov allegedly halted the implementation of the orders because he had learned that the dying sultan had told his successor not to confront Russia over the construction of the fortress on the Ingul, that it was not a violation of the treaties and that it was being constructed on Russian territory. Consequently, Chernyshev and Keyserling received rescripts with a request for George II and Maria Theresa to try to keep the Turks in such an attitude and for the allied courts not to insist on the suspension of the Russian venture "in which the empress could not help thinking her honour and dignity were concerned, as this fortress bore her name".⁹⁶ Bestuzhev soon informed Guy Dickens that the orders sent by the courier had been followed much to the Porte's satisfaction. Indeed, the colonel learned from Porter's letter (of 29 January) that everything had gone in accordance with London's wishes and that the delay in handing the letters to the diplomats of the allied courts was a Russian 'tricks' to which little importance was attached.⁹⁷ Williams' dispatches from Dresden did not suggest the slightest doubt either. In his report, the Welshman consistently stressed that he considered the halt to construction a success for British diplomacy and a personal achievement for Chancellor Bestuzhev. With his mind full of such convictions, Sir Charles left Saxony in mid-May, setting off for his new post in St Petersburg.⁹⁸

In the spring, Guy Dickens reported that the Turkish envoy Dervish Mustapha Efendi had arrived in St Petersburg with a notification of Osman III's ascension to the throne and that Dolgorukov had been delegated as the Russian envoy to Constantinople to congratulate the new ruler.⁹⁹ The dry, succinct, and purely factual tone of the reports on the subject clearly showed that the colonel considered the Russo-Turkish crisis to have ended. This was the last success of this experienced and prudent diplomat's six-year mission in St Petersburg. Disheartened by the dilatoriness of the Russians in the negotiations for a new subsidy convention, he submitted his resignation and, after Williams' arrival in St Petersburg, sailed from Kronstadt to Lübeck in late July 1755.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ TNA, SP 91/60, Guy Dickens to Holderness, St Petersburg, 4/15, 11/22, 14/25 (quote) Feb. 1755 (rcv. 10, 17 25 March). Indeed, Keyserling was ordered to demand in Vienna that Austrian diplomatic representatives in Constantinople act together with Obreskov; Анисимов, 'Дело о строительстве', p. 73.

⁹⁷ TNA, SP 91/60, fols 5–5v, Guy Dickens to Holderness, St Petersburg, 21 Feb./4 March, 25 Feb./8 March 1755 (rcv. 29 March, 1 Apr.).

⁹⁸ TNA, SP 88/77, fols 128v–129, 140v–142v, 189–189v, 191–192v, Williams to Holderness, Dresden, 30 March, 6 Apr., 11, 13 May 1755 (rcv. 8 Apr., 14 Apr., 14, 17 May).

⁹⁹ TNA, SP 91/60, Guy Dickens to Holderness and Robinson, St Petersburg, 11/22 Apr., 22 Apr./3 May, 16/27 V 1755 (rcv. 23, 30 May, 13, 21 June).

¹⁰⁰ TNA, SP 91/61, Guy Dickens to Holderness, St Petersburg, 11/22 July 1755 (rcv. 15 Aug.); *ibid.*, fols 31–31v, Williams to Holderness, St Petersburg, 17/27 July 1755 (rcv. 22 Aug.); TNA, SP 91/60, Guy Dickens to Holderness, Lübeck, 19 Aug. 1755 (rcv. 22 Aug.); Hanczewski, *Dyplomacja*, p. 179.

* * *

Soon, new concerns clouded the British satisfaction. Porter reported that once again the Turks had become much more concerned “that the court of Petersburg had resumed the work of the fortress”. The British diplomat, in collaboration with Obreskov, tried to diffuse the situation, suggesting a mission of a special officer to the construction site. He told his superiors that these actions had reassured the Ottomans, at a particularly difficult time of increased Prussian and Swedish intrigues at that. He also suspected the French party in Poland of informing the Porte that the Russian investment had been resumed.¹⁰¹ In his dispatches to Williams, the Earl of Holderness highlighted the concerns about the issue in connection with Chernyshev’s London statements. That this was received very seriously indeed is evidenced by the fact that the Earl of Holderness considered the possibility of Williams passing to Elisabeth the note abandoned by Guy Dickens, concerning the British mediation in the dispute with Turkey. In a ‘most secret’ instruction, informing Williams of the worsening conflict in America and the growing conflict with France, the Earl of Holderness stressed that a subsidy treaty with Russia was becoming particularly necessary. He thus allowed for an increase in the subsidy amount, if required, provided that Russia refrained from any actions that could exacerbate the relations with Turkey.¹⁰² He wrote to Porter that the “court of Russia had not yet laid aside their intention of building the fortress upon the River Ingul, the dangerous consequences of which measure have been hitherto fortunately prevented by His Majesty’s influence at Petersburg”. The British firmly ruled out making any effort in Constantinople to obtain Turkish approval for the fortress. Obreskov had to be pressured again not to take actions that might irritate the Turks.¹⁰³

From St Petersburg, Williams reported that he had spoken with Chancellor Bestuzhev about the fortress, arguing that if the Russian forces were to be tied down in the south, little would be left of them to fight a likely Prussian or Swedish attack or to show support to the allies. Bestuzhev fully agreed with Williams, stressing that Obreskov had received no new instructions to make declarations that could provoke the Turks. The chancellor asked Williams to keep the subsidy negotiations secret, which is why an impression had to be created to make their

¹⁰¹ TNA, SP 97/38, Porter to Robinson, Constantinople, 17 May 1755 (rcv. 23 June, the dispatch arrived in Hanover before 17 June); *ibid.*, appendix: Porter’s note, Constantinople, 12 May 1755. “When in May in Vienna Keyserling once again took up the topic of building a fortress, Kaunitz was beside himself with rage”, Dyck, ‘New Serbia’, pp. 15–16.

¹⁰² TNA, SP 91/60, Holderness to Williams, Hanover, 17 June 1755 (‘separate’ and ‘most secret’); appendices: Robinson to Holderness, London, 30 May 1755; Holderness to Keith, Hanover, 17 June 1755; no texts of the appendices in the codex. Cf. H. Kaplan, *Russia and the Outbreak of the Seven Years’ War* (Berkeley – Los Angeles, 1968), p. 16; Hanczewski, *Dyplomacja*, p. 180.

¹⁰³ TNA, SP 97/38, Holderness to Porter, Hanover, 17 June 1755.

talks seem to concern Turkish matters solely. Therefore, he asked for an official note on the matter, to which Williams agreed, convinced that this was only a formality. In it, he repeated the old argument against the Russians' continuation of the project, hoping that Elisabeth "trouvera plus à propos de surseoir pareilles démarches jusqu'à l'existence des conjonctures plus propres et plus favorables".¹⁰⁴ It is impossible not to have the impression that the Russians engaged in an elaborate game to obtain an advantageous declaration from Williams. Unsurprisingly, Hanover became immediately concerned by the excerpt from the note quoted above, instructing Williams to be more cautious "as it may possibly give handle to some future pretensions if ever the court of Russia should be ill advised enough to renew this topic".¹⁰⁵ The day after sending these instructions, the Earl Holderness saw that he had judged the reality correctly, when reading Williams' new report that he had heard from Vorontsov in the matter of the fortress that the Russians would wait for "more favourable opportunities".¹⁰⁶

Although, as Porter suggested, additional concern could also be generated by the fact that the Porte was insisting that the construction of the fortress violated the Treaty of Belgrade, the diplomat himself clearly downplayed the threat.¹⁰⁷ Replying directly to the instructions from Hanover (of 17 June), Porter did not hide his surprise at Chernyshev's statements, but, juxtaposing them with Keyserling's statements in Vienna, and Obreskov's conduct and declarations in Constantinople, he concluded that there was no real cause for concern. The court of St Petersburg, according to the Englishman, only sought to strengthen its own position in its relations with the allies. He wrote to Williams in an equally reassuring tone. In a separate dispatch (marked 'secret'), he put the Russian abandonment of the fortress in the context of the fears of French, Prussian, and Swedish intrigues in Constantinople. The information that the Turks were warned about the resumption of the construction of the fortress allegedly by Arslan Giray, the Crimean Khan, was not a cause of concern either, for, as he wrote, "I have this moment, on closing the dispatch, advice, that the vizir has before him all the registers, relating, what has passed concerning the fortress, but I am told my papers and the Russian declaration will persuade him, that all the suggestions made by the khan are false, and without foundation, they know him sold to the French".¹⁰⁸ In view of the new information about the resumption of work on the fortress, the reis efendi returned to the proposal to send a special mission to investigate the matter, and

¹⁰⁴ TNA, SP 91/60, Williams to Holderness, St Petersburg, 23 June/4 July 1755 (rcv. 18 July); *ibid.*, appendix: Williams' note [St. Petersburg, 2 July 1755].

¹⁰⁵ TNA, SP 91/61, fols 45–46v, Holderness to Williams, Hanover, 24 July 1755 ('apart'); TNA, SP 91/60, second copy.

¹⁰⁶ TNA, SP 91/60, Williams to Holderness, St Petersburg, 27 June/8 July 1755 (rcv. 25 July).

¹⁰⁷ TNA SP 97/38, Porter to Holderness, Constantinople, 16 June, 3 July 1755 (rcv. 5, 8 Aug.).

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, Porter to Holderness, Constantinople, 1 Aug. 1755 (two dispatches under that date; r. 10 Sept.); *ibid.*, appendix: Porter to Williams, Constantinople, 25 July 1755.

a Russian diplomat prepared a relevant letter for the purpose. Porter concluded from this that the Russians were honest in their intentions and that they could not have resumed the construction works if they had agreed to the mission. The Turks were said to have completely trusted the Russians (they did not intend to send an emissary), and the matter ended with the change of khan. Uncovering these mechanisms in detail obviously requires further research (also on Turkish sources). This does not change the fact that we have no reason to doubt that the Ottomans' unequivocal declaration (expressed during Porter's audience with the Porte's dragoman on 14 August) of trusting Obreskov did not have real grounds.¹⁰⁹

In response to these reports, Robinson expressed the hope that any attempt by France to alarm the Turks about the alleged negative consequences for them of a British-Russian rapprochement (a subsidy treaty) would be doomed to failure. This was, of course, helped by the fact that "the late disputes concerning the fortress had entirely subsided".¹¹⁰

According to the diplomat himself, despite the unusually frequent changes in the office of vizier (Nâilî Abdullah Paşa, in office from 19 May until 24 August; replaced by Silahdar Bıyıklı Ali Pasha, until 23 October), the Turks remained peaceful. Dervish Mustapha Efendi, too, returned from St Petersburg with good impressions. Despite the fact that the Porte wished he would pass by the disputed fortress, this had no adverse consequences. Porter denied Vergennes's tactical successes in the seraglio and the divan. The crisis ended in the British diplomat's reports, which included information from Obreskov that the Turks had sent emissaries to confirm, unequivocally, the lack of progress in the construction of the Fortress of St Elisabeth on the Ingul River. On 15 November, another grand vizier, Yirmisekizzade Mehmed Said Pasha (in office from 25 October 1755 until 1 April 1756), granted an audience to Porter, assuring him of Osman III's respect and friendship for George II.¹¹¹

After the signing of the Russo-British Convention in St Petersburg (19/30 September 1755) and the court conference of Russian dignitaries ('great privy council' – 26 September/7 October) with Empress Elisabeth, Williams emphasised that the Russo-Turkish relations were very good. Chancellor Bestuzhev, too, kept the ambassador convinced that there was no fear of a renewed crisis.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ "I assured him of the sentiments of the court of Russia towards the Porte, and that they might be quite easy about the fortress. He told me they were extremely pleased with Mr Obrescov's frankness and plain dealing in that affair", TNA SP 97/38, Porter to Holderness, Constantinople, 16 Aug. 1755 (two dispatches, one of them "secret" (quote); r. 19 Sept.); *ibid.*, appendix: A. Obreskov to Alexander Glebov, Constantinople, 7 Aug. 1755.

¹¹⁰ TNA SP 97/38, Robinson to Porter, London-Whitehall, 7 Oct. 1755.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, Porter to Holderness, Constantinople, 1 Sept., 16 Oct., 15 Nov. (report dispersed across the volume) 1755 (rcv. 8 Oct., 18 Nov.).

¹¹² TNA, SP 91/61, fol. 155–156, 183–184v, Williams to Holderness, St Petersburg, 11 Oct., 15 Nov. 1755 (rcv. 4 Nov., 10 Dec.). Cf. T. Szwaciński, 'Dresden in der russischen Politik am Vorabend des Renversement des alliances. Die sächsischen Bemühungen um einen Subsidienvertrag mit Großbritannien oder Frankreich (1754–1756)', *Neues Archiv für sächsische Geschichte*, 94 (2023), p. 98.

Yet published Russian sources show clearly that, in reassuring the British, the Russians did not intend to abandon the construction of the fortress at all. Moreover, they returned to the matter almost immediately after signing the agreement with George II (in December 1755). It was not until the news of the British-Prussian Convention of Westminster that the St Petersburg court became convinced that the outbreak of a war with Frederick II was a matter of months. This changed St Petersburg's position again. Established in March 1756, the Russian Conference at the High Court drew up a "systematic plan to constrain the forces of the Prussian king". Under its point five, "efforts were to be made to keep the Turks and the Swedes calm and passive". Therefore, it was decided to "halt the construction of the said fortress until the matter has been reconsidered in the future". Thus, paradoxically, the policy pursued by Whitehall, which through the agreement with Frederick II launched the 'Diplomatic Revolution', prompted St Petersburg to take, this time genuine, decision to abandon the construction of the Fortress of St Elisabeth. However, in the new circumstances this was fundamentally against the interests of the King of England. Nor could there be any doubt as to who the strategic ally of St Petersburg was and what the far-reaching goals of the Russians were, if the Conference envisaged that the "Viennese court, by recovering Silesia, will become stronger and an anti-Turkish alliance with it will be made more relevant and real". The matter of building a fortress returned in 1760.¹¹³

In conclusion, it is worth noting that, in all likelihood, Russia's halt to construction of the Fortress of St Elisabeth in late 1754 and early 1755 was a tactical move to strengthen its position in negotiations for a subsidy convention with the British. A definite answer to the matter will be possible only after a systematic analysis of the Russian sources, of course. What seems particularly important is the extraordinary enthusiasm in Whitehall and among the King of England's diplomats following the Russian decision. This shows clearly that the British were easily manipulated. The tone of the British diplomatic correspondence, triumphant at times, must have reassured English politicians in their belief in their power in St Petersburg and their superiority over the Austrians at the Russian court. In such circumstances, they also easily downplayed the revival of the matter by the Russians in 1755. All this would subsequently give rise to the bitter disappointments of George II's diplomats, when it became clear that their influence in St Petersburg was, in fact, an illusion.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ *Сборник Императорскаго русскаго историческаго общества*, vol. 136: *Протоколы Конференции при Высочайшем дворе, I: 14 Марта 1756 – 13 Марта 1757* (Санкт-Петербург, 1912), pp. 31–33, 37–38, *Protocols of the Conference at the High Court, St Petersburg*, 15/26 March, 21 March/1 Apr. 1756; *ibid.*, pp. 39–40, appendix: report for Elisabeth [St. Petersburg, 21 March/1 Apr.]; *ibid.*, p. 41, excerpt of the protocol to the Senate, St Petersburg, 21 March/1 Apr.; *ibid.*, p. 42, excerpt of the protocol to the Collegium of Foreign Affairs, St Petersburg, 21 March/1 Apr. Cf. Анисимов, 'Дело о строительстве', pp. 75–79.

¹¹⁴ Cf. T. Szwaciński, 'Гонка курьеров: переломный момент в кризисе российско-британского союза накануне Семилетней войны', in *Metody i środki oddziaływania Imperiów*.

Worthy of note is Alfred Ritter von Arneth's conclusion based on Austrian sources: "In this latter respect, the representations of the Viennese court were not without success, and Russia suspended the fortification construction that had already begun". Harvey L. Dyck adds: "Austria's Ambassador in St Petersburg, Esterhazy, celebrated the decision as a triumph of Habsburg statecraft".¹¹⁵ Therefore, it was not only the Englishmen who claimed decisive influence on the decisions made in St Petersburg. Yet without a systematic study of Russian sources, it should be said once again, we will not be able to resolve these contradictions.

It is also worth noting the Russian need, emphasised by the British, "to act consistently with the empress of Russia's honour and dignity" (elsewhere "her honour and dignity were concerned, as this fortress bore its name"). We can see in this a clear manifestation of 'prestige politics'.¹¹⁶

At the end it should be said that it was worth taking a closer look at the mechanisms described above for one more reason. As Władysław Konopczyński observes, already in late 1756 "the roles of France and England in Constantinople changed". In the new situation, it was the English who began to incite the Turks against Russia.¹¹⁷ Without revealing this breakthrough in the diplomatic game on the Bosphorus, the picture of the 'Diplomatic Revolution' would be incomplete.

Abstract

In 1751, in Zaporizhia, Russians began to organise the colony of 'New Serbia', which initially complicated St Petersburg's relations with its ally Vienna, as the settlers were refugees from areas under Habsburg rule. When construction of the fortress of Saint Elisabeth on the Ingul River began in 1754, it was strongly opposed by the Turks, who regarded it as a breach of the peace treaty between the two states, signed 15 years earlier in Belgrade. In June 1754, the conflict escalated rapidly, with the Turks even threatening to take military action and to use French mediation. British and Austrian diplomats in Constantinople (James Porter and Heinrich von Penckler) tried to reassure the Turks, persuade the Russian resident, Alexei Obreskov, to comply with the Porte's wishes, and prevent France from meddling, as they greatly feared French intrigues in Constantinople and in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Such actions were fully approved by politicians in London, who sought to influence the Russians through their diplomatic post in St Petersburg, headed by Colonel Melchior Guy Dickens. In addition, they also tried to coordinate their actions with the Austrians, who were also very concerned about the escalation of the Russo-Turkish conflict. It was clear to the British that Russia, embroiled in a dispute with Turkey, would not be a valuable ally in their plans to

Ideologia i praktyka polityczna państwa rosyjskiego/sowieckiego/rosyjskiego w latach 1689–2022, ed. A. Nowak, in collab. with Ł. Dryblak (Warszawa, 2024), pp. 141–156.

¹¹⁵ Ritter von Arneth, *Geschichte*, p. 370; Dyck, 'New Serbia', p. 15.

¹¹⁶ Cf. D. Dukwicz, 'Prestiż jako ważny czynnik w polityce imperialnej Rosji Katarzyny II na przykładzie tzw. sprawy dysydenckiej w Rzeczypospolitej', in *Metody i środki*, pp. 157–168.

¹¹⁷ W. Konopczyński, *Polska w dobie wojny siedmioletniej*, part 1: (1755–1758), ed. S. Askenazy, Monografie w zakresie dziejów nowożytnych Series, vols 7–8 (Kraków–Warszawa, 1909), pp. 183–184, 396–397; cf. Wood, *The English Embassy*, pp. 556–557.

defend Hanover against France and Prussia, the purpose of the ongoing negotiations on a new Russian-British subsidiary treaty. Additional concerns about the developments were raised by the Russian demand for Austrian *désintéressement* on the construction of the fortress. However, the real panic erupted in Whitehall in early November, when news came from Constantinople of the French proposals for an alliance with the Turks, proposals submitted two years earlier. According to the British, the construction of the fortress could have led the Porte to become open to Versailles' proposals. The Russians were, therefore, strongly urged to abandon their investment project, but St Petersburg initially remained adamant, defending its right to build the fortress. Nevertheless, according to information Porter received, Obreskov halted the execution of his instructions out of fear of escalating the conflict. Concerns ended when, in late 1754, London was informed that a council of the highest Russian dignitaries, held in St Petersburg a month earlier, had decided to abandon the construction of the fortress. This was seen by British politicians as evidence of the effectiveness of George II's diplomacy in St Petersburg and as foreshadowing a significant increase in their influence in Constantinople. In May 1755, the threat of a crisis recurred, but Porter assured Whitehall that this was merely a game played by the Russians to strengthen their position. In fact, however, the Russians intended to return to the matter immediately after signing a subsidy convention with Britain (19/30 September 1755), and it was not until 1756 that the conviction of the inevitability of a war with Prussia led them to truly abandon the construction of the fortress. This, however, was already against London's interests, for, as allies of Frederick II (from 16 January 1756), the British soon began to hope for the outbreak of a Russo-Turkish conflict.

Translated by Anna Kijak

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